CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND DISPUTE RESOLUTION IN THE WEST OHIO
CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

J. Christopher Scott

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In fulfillment of the requirements of the Writing Project for the Certificate Program in Mediation
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J. Christopher Scott is a lay member of the West Ohio Conference of the United Methodist Church. He has served in many leadership positions within the local church, and has participated in the resolution of numerous disputes within congregations to which he has belonged. He has served in executive management positions in the large corporate and small business arenas and has been instrumental in developing and administering management systems that addressed conflict management within those organizations. He has been awarded the degrees of Master of Business Administration by the Wharton School, Master of Arts from the University of Pennsylvania and Bachelor of Arts from Kenyon College. He has received appointments as Adjunct Faculty at the Ohio Dominican University and the Methodist Theological School in Ohio.

Chris is a member of the Peacemakers, an independent group of conflict management and dispute resolution mediators and consultants, which serves congregations in the West Ohio Conference.
“Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God.”
Matthew 5:9

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” 2 Corinthians 5:18

Introduction

In discussing the subject of “conflict management” and “dispute resolution”, it is important that we clearly define the terms we are using. Often in the treatment of this field, “conflict” and “dispute” are used interchangeably, and with a solely negative connotation. For the purposes of this paper, they have related, but very different meanings. Firstly, conflict is inevitable in any interaction between people. It is therefore present in every organization, in every association, in which people participate. It is the “expression of dissatisfaction or disagreement with an interaction, process, product or service. Someone or some group is unhappy with someone else or something else. This dissatisfaction can result from multiple factors: differing expectations, competing goals, conflicting interests, confusing communications or interpersonal relations.”

Conflict may also be the result of disagreements over personal values and beliefs. This is often a factor in conflict within the church, and often proves to be some of the most difficult conflict to manage in a constructive manner.

In addition to being inevitable, conflict may also be necessary and positive. Without a constructive understanding of conflict and the resulting differences in viewpoint, there can be no growth and no response to changing circumstances. Organizations become fossils, without the

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3 Costantino and Merchant, *Designing Conflict Management Systems*, p. 4.
ability to evolve in response to societal change and the growth in personal and organizational understanding. Conflict is therefore an ongoing process within an organization, neither inherently positive nor negative. It is the way in which organizational conflict is managed, that will determine whether the outcome of the conflict management process is constructive or destructive to the organization and to those participating within it.

While “conflict” is therefore a process of managing differences between participants, the term “dispute” refers to one possible outcome or by-product of conflict. When “dissatisfaction and unresolved conflict” escalate to a level requiring specific and immediate remedial action, conflict has manifested itself as a “dispute”, requiring resolution. A successful conflict management process is one which minimizes the occurrence of disputes, and provides a positive framework for addressing those that do arise.

Many people express surprise that the church should be a fertile arena for conflict, and resulting disputes. In fact, conflict may be so prevalent in the church because the personal views of its members are so passionately held, and their personal understandings of the faith and the mission of the church are so diverse. How the church manages this conflict is therefore all important. “Conflict is a fact of life –even within the church, and it will never be completely eliminated. The two most common responses to conflict are to ignore it and hope it goes away or handle it badly. In either case, the only thing likely to go away is part of your congregation. Well-managed conflict, on the other hand, is good for your church. Well-managed conflict is a healthy part of a growing, responsive, in-touch church body.”

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4 Costantino and Merchant, *Designing Conflict Management Systems*, p. 5.
The objective of this paper is to examine the conflict management process and the practices used to resolve disputes, within the West Ohio Conference of the United Methodist Church. Having reviewed current practices, the paper will then consider recommendations to make the process more effective and to enable the Conference to constructively manage conflict and resolve disputes in the future.

Demographics and Governance of the West Ohio Conference

The United Methodist Church is divided geographically into conferences, each headed by a bishop. The church in Ohio is served by two conferences. The West Ohio Conference, led by Bishop Bruce R. Ough, comprises 58 of the state’s 88 counties and approximately 60% of its land area. Based in Columbus, the second largest metropolitan area in Ohio, it is demographically representative of the state as whole, encompassing large urban areas, suburban communities, the Appalachian foothills of southeastern Ohio and the farmlands in the western part of the state.

The West Ohio Conference has slightly fewer than 250,000 members, belonging to 1200 congregations. The Conference is administratively divided into eight districts, each headed by a district superintendent appointed by the bishop. The district superintendents have been delegated authority by the bishop to “…oversee the total ministry of the clergy and of the churches in the communities of the district…” They are also responsible for “…giving spiritual

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6 West Ohio Conference Website to be found at www.westohioumc.org
7 Harriett Jane Olson, Editor, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2004* (Nashville, Tenn.: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), p. 300. “The Discipline is the book of law of The United Methodist Church. It is the product of 200 years of the General Conferences of the denominations which now form The United Methodist Church. The Discipline as the instrument for setting forth the laws, polity, and the process by which United Methodists govern themselves remains constant. Each General Convention amends, perfects, clarifies, and adds its own contribution to the Discipline.” (*Discipline*, p. v)
leadership to clergy and laity in the churches of the district."\(^8\) Please note the map of the West Ohio Conference on the page below.\(^9\)

WEST OHIO CONFERENCE

\(^8\) Ibid., p.301.
\(^9\) Provided by the Conference Office, West Ohio Conference, 32 Wesley Boulevard, Worthington, Ohio 43085.
Review of Current Conflict Management and Dispute Resolution Policies and Practices

In undertaking this review, I have relied upon interviews with most of those responsible for various aspects of conflict management and dispute resolution in the Conference, to provide different perspectives on the process currently being employed. I also reviewed the results of a survey which was sent to the eight district superintendents, five of whom participated. My sources within the Conference were as follows.

Interviews

1. The Rev. Bruce R. Ough, Bishop, West Ohio Conference
2. Mr. Philip R. Moots, Partner, Moots, Carter and Hogan and Conference Chancellor
3. Mr. George G. Howard, Director, Connectional Ministry, West Ohio Conference
4. The Rev. Cyndy Garn, District Superintendent, Capitol Area North District
5. The Rev. N. Eugene Brundige, Pastor, Labor Arbitrator and Co-Founder and Director, of the Peacemakers
6. Mr. Joseph R. Palmer, President, Mediation Services of Ohio, and Co-Founder of the Peacemakers

Survey Respondents – District Superintendents

1. The Rev. Cyndy Garn, Capitol Area North District
2. The Rev. Tom Hanover, Foothills District
3. The Rev. Tom Tumblin, Northwest Plains District
4. The Rev. Randy Stearns, Ohio River Valley District
5. The Rev. David Brown, Shawnee Valley District
I will summarize the perspectives of those I interviewed and the results from the surveys received. I will then draw my own conclusions concerning the process of conflict management and dispute resolution in the West Ohio Conference, adding my recommendations for enhancing the process going forward.

**The Interviews**

**Bishop Bruce R. Ough**

The bishop in the United Methodist Church has broad responsibility for the church in the conference to which he has been called. The bishop is “to lead and oversee the spiritual and temporal affairs of The United Methodist Church… to strengthen the local church, giving spiritual leadership to both laity and clergy; and to build relationships with people of local congregations of the area. The bishop is “to guard, transmit, teach and proclaim, corporately and individually, the apostolic faith, as it is expressed in scripture and tradition…” and “to provide liaison and leadership in the quest for Christian unity in ministry, mission and structure…” Clearly, these broad definitions of episcopal authority include responsibility for the unity and good order of the local congregations and the need to manage conflict and resolve disputes.

Prior to coming to the West Ohio Conference in 2000, Bishop Ough served on the conference staff in Iowa. There, he initiated a program to enhance the conflict management skills of the clergy by encouraging all district superintendents and clergy entering their first church pastorate,

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10 Interview conducted with Bishop Ough at his office on March 22, 2007.
to attend a 3-4 day seminar presented by the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center.\textsuperscript{12} The program entitled \textit{Mediation Skills Training Institute for Church Leaders}, “is designed to equip church leaders with the skills necessary to deal effectively with interpersonal, congregational, and other forms of group conflict”.\textsuperscript{13} The purpose of the program was to develop a skilled cadre of trained clergy who would be able to identify potentially negative conflicts before they became open disputes, and if they did, to provide the skills to facilitate or mediate those disputes.

Upon his arrival in Columbus in 2000, Bishop Ough hoped to institute a similar program in the West Ohio Conference. The goal was to develop a team of trained church leaders who could in turn train others throughout the conference, to develop a “tool kit” of conflict management resources and provide skilled mediators to congregations experiencing substantive disputes. The bishop’s second objective was to establish a group of experienced mediators, facilitators and trainers, independent of the Conference, to whom the Conference and the district superintendents could turn for assistance with troubled congregations. He called on two men with many years of broad experience in ADR\textsuperscript{14} to establish the Peacemakers, an independent network of lay and clergy members of the Conference. At the bishop’s request, it was co-founded by Eugene Brundige, a labor arbitrator and local pastor in the Conference, and Joseph Palmer, President of Mediation Services of Ohio, and a lay member of the Conference. Both had extensive experience in church dispute resolution. The Peacemakers were to be a resource for the Conference and the clergy, but independent of judicatory oversight, so that the parties to a congregational dispute could view it as a neutral presence, free of organizational bias or agendas. Bishop’s Ough’s plan,

\textsuperscript{12} A non-profit ministry based in Lombard, Illinois, Lombard “works to encourage the nonviolent transformation of conflict in relationships in homes, workplaces, schools, churches, and throughout the world.” (www.LMPeaceCenter.org).
\textsuperscript{13} Registration brochure from the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center.
\textsuperscript{14} Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) encompasses many forms of dispute resolution short of litigation, including negotiation, mediation and arbitration.
to implement increasingly comprehensive conflict management training and to found the
Peacemakers, was intended to create a Conference culture focused on managing conflict
proactively, by providing the training and resources required.

The bishop was candid in his evaluation of the results of these objectives. Training has been
sporadic mainly due to limited educational funding within the Conference. Other pressing
priorities arose after his arrival, which have distracted the attention of the Conference away from
his original plans for conflict management. The Peacemakers are called on from time to time to
provide training upon request, but there is no overall plan to provide comprehensive training to
the district superintendents or parish clergy, as had been originally anticipated. The Peacemakers
have been a valuable resource, but its effectiveness has been restricted by its small numbers and
because all are volunteers with full time employment inside or outside of the church.

The bishop explained that there are two principal forms of dispute which the Conference must
address. The first relates to disputes within local congregations, either (1) between members or
groups of members, or (2) between a member or a group of members and the pastor. Typically,
in the first instance, Bishop Ough’s preferred “style” is to try to resolve the dispute at the lowest
possible organizational level. This involves trying to get the pastor or a respected lay leader, if
they are not parties to the dispute, to facilitate or mediate an understanding between the parties.
Should that not prove effective, the pastor may approach the district superintendent for advice.
The district superintendent might then suggest involving the Peacemakers or some other
facilitator/mediator from outside the congregation. The goal is to avoid top down arbitration
from the judicatory whenever possible, and to encourage the parties to the dispute to employ
self-determination in seeking a mutually acceptable resolution, through negotiation, facilitation
or mediation. When the pastor is a party to a congregational dispute, however, the bishop is more
likely to be involved, due to his episcopal responsibility for the clergy of the conference.

Typically, in these cases, the bishop will appoint a district superintendent who is not involved with the congregation, or a team of district superintendents, to undertake an assessment of the situation. The bishop, and sometimes the assessment team, may then arbitrate the dispute, making the final decision. In severe disputes, the issue may be addressed by the Bishop’s cabinet as a whole, which is comprised of all of the district superintendents in the Conference. In cases in which the removal of the pastor is deemed to be necessary, Bishop Ough, who is responsible for the appointment and assignment of clergy in the Conference, will act as the ultimate arbitrator in rendering the decision. There are instances, however, involving a dispute between congregational members and a pastor in which the district superintendent may determine that the Peacemakers should be engaged to provide a neutral assessment, which could then lead to some combination of facilitation, mediation and training.

The second type of dispute involving the bishop and the Conference occurs when a formal complaint is filed against a member of the clergy. The bishop will then follow the procedure established in the *Discipline*.\(^\text{15}\) Within 45 days, he must either dismiss the complaint, after consultation with his cabinet (his district superintendents), “as having no basis in law or fact”\(^\text{16}\), or initiate a process of “supervisory response”. If he proceeds with the complaint, the bishop then has 120 days to take one of three courses of action.

1. Refer the matter to a third party mediator if this has not been attempted; or
2. Dismiss the complaint with the consent of the cabinet giving the reasons therefore in writing; or

\(^\text{15}\) *Book of Discipline*, Section XV, “Complaints”, pp 271-278.
\(^\text{16}\) Ibid., p. 273.
(3) Refer the complaint as an administrative complaint (incompetence or unwillingness to perform ministerial duties) or as a judicial complaint (church law).\textsuperscript{17}

In order to reach a decision on the appropriate course of action, the bishop must complete the “supervisory response” process. The process is as follows.

(1) The complaint is committed to writing and furnished to both parties.

(2) The bishop meets individually with each party, beginning with the complainant, usually with another person present to verify what transpires.

(3) Each party is asked what he/she would consider a “just resolution”.

(4) Additional information gathering takes place to verify the positions of the parties. At this stage, the bishop may decide to dismiss the complaint or suggest mediation.

(5) If the bishop decides not to dismiss, and mediation is either not tried or is unsuccessful, then the bishop becomes the sole adjudicator of the dispute.

Extremely serious charges may, on rare occasions, be referred to the Board of Ordained Ministry of the denomination, or to church courts. These cases are governed by the provisions of “Judicial Administration”.\textsuperscript{18} In the West Ohio Conference, Bishop Ough advised that he strongly believes that all complaints should be resolved within the Conference. In his six and a half years in West Ohio, all complaints have been resolved locally. This has been facilitated by amendments to the \textit{Book of Discipline} in 2000, giving the bishop greater latitude in the disposition of complaints.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., Chapter 7, pp.709-746.
Philip R. Moots

Mr. Moots has served as Chancellor of the West Ohio Conference since 1997. A partner in the firm of Moots, Carter and Hogan in Columbus, he is appointed by the bishop and confirmed by the annual conference. According to the Discipliine, the chancellor must be a member in good standing of a local church and is a member of an appropriate bar of a state of the episcopal area (conference led by the bishop). The chancellor shall serve as legal advisor to the bishop and the annual conference.

Mr. Moots becomes involved in disputes involving the Conference only when there is the potential for litigation. These might involve employment issues or child molestation complaints, a particular source of concern for the church today. The chancellor participated in the formulation of the “safe sanctuary” policy of the West Ohio Conference to provide oversight over paid staff and volunteers who work with children and young people in the church. He also works with a specialized Conference Sexual Harassment Team to provide training and oversight of Conference staff in this arena. Legal issues are referred to the chancellor by the bishop and the eight district superintendents in the Conference.

While the chancellor does not become involved in church disputes unless they involve potential litigation, he confirmed that non-litigious issues are often referred by Bishop Ough, or more frequently by the district superintendents, to Eugene Brundige, the director of the Peacemakers. When third party mediators are required in a complaint against a clergy person under the

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19 Telephone interview conducted with Philip Moots on March 6, 2007.
20 To avoid confusion over the use of the term “conference”, the geographical conference headed by the bishop is the primary organizational unit in the United Methodist Church. Each conference meets in Annual Conference to conduct its business. Each district and congregation in the conference is represented at the Annual Conference.
21 Book of Discipline, p.355.
“supervisory response” process mentioned above, mediator assignments are made by Bishop Ough’s assistant, the Rev. Joyce Fry.

Mr. George G. Howard\textsuperscript{22}

Mr. Howard, who has recently assumed new responsibilities in the Conference, was formerly Director of Congregational Development. Early in Bishop’s Ough’s tenure, Mr. Howard served as Conference coordinator for congregational dispute resolution, tracking the progress of the dispute process throughout the Conference, in conjunction with the district superintendents. He advised, however, that with the formation of the Peacemakers, this task is now the direct responsibility of the district superintendents, working with Eugene Brundige of the Peacemakers.

Rev. Cyndy Garn\textsuperscript{23}

Rev. Garn is the district superintendent for the Capitol Area North District in Columbus. Due to the recent reorganization of the Conference, which reduced the number of districts from fifteen to eight, all of the district superintendents now have much broader geographical responsibilities in terms of the number of congregations in each district, as well as the geographical area to be covered. Partially offsetting this change was the appointment of one or two ordained clergy, some of whom previously served as district superintendents, as assistants to the new district superintendents. The task of providing both administrative and pastoral oversight to these larger districts is challenging. This is certainly true in the area of conflict management and dispute resolution. Rev. Garn and the other district superintendents depend upon the local pastors or lay people to advise them when serious conflict is developing. The district superintendents, or their assistants, conduct the initial conflict assessment. Occasionally, a serious situation may be

\textsuperscript{22} Interview with Mr. Howard conducted by email on March 5, 2007.
\textsuperscript{23} Interview with Rev. Garn conducted at the Conference office on February 15, 2007.
referred to the bishop, but normally it is addressed at the district level. This is consistent with Bishop Ough’s philosophy that disputes are best resolved at the lowest possible administrative level, that which is closest to the affected congregation.

After conducting the initial conflict assessment, the district superintendent either seeks to work with the congregational clergy and lay leadership to resolve the dispute, or engages the Peacemakers, or some other outside resource, to provide facilitation, mediation or training to the local church. Often the districts maintain a budget to cover the costs of such outside intervention.

**Rev. N. Eugene Brundige**<sup>24</sup> and the Peacemakers

As mentioned above, Rev. Brundige has extensive experience in the field of dispute resolution. Currently serving as pastor of two congregations in Columbus, he has had more than twenty years of national experience as a labor arbitrator. He has also been requested to assist in many congregational and judicatory disputes, serving as facilitator, mediator and trainer. Due to his extensive background in the church and in ADR<sup>25</sup>, Rev Brundige and Mr. Joseph Palmer, also a professional mediator with extensive experience in church disputes, were asked by Bishop Ough in 2002 to join him in the establishment of a comprehensive conflict management and dispute resolution process for the West Ohio Conference. The main objective was to provide mediation, facilitation and training resources to the local congregations so that they would be able to address conflict situations earlier in the process.

It was decided that the Conference would maintain an “arms length relationship” on disputes referred to the Peacemakers, delegating responsibility for dispute resolution to the district

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<sup>24</sup> Interview of Rev. Brundige conducted at New Horizons U.M. Church, Columbus, on January 10, 2007, and in group conversations of the Peacemakers on October 11, 2006 and February 28, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Alternative Dispute Resolution; see note #14.
superintendents and the Peacemakers. While affiliated individually as members of the Conference, the lay and clergy members of the Peacemakers are independent of Conference oversight, serving as independent contractors to the parties. In order to ensure a high level of professionalism, candidate members of the Peacemakers must successfully meet the following requirements to become qualified mediators and consultants.\textsuperscript{26}

1. Complete training in Basic Mediation Skills
2. Undertake training in the biblical, theological basis of Church Based Mediation
3. Participate in on-the-job training while observing and participating in dispute situations under the supervision of Rev. Brundige and Mr. Palmer
4. Commit to attend regular training/support meetings with other members of the Peacemakers

The Peacemakers are prepared to offer the following services to the congregations.\textsuperscript{27}

- Assessment of conflict situations leading to recommendations as to how the issues might be addressed
- Mediation and facilitation services for groups, individuals, church leaders or congregations
- Training in conflict management and dispute resolution

Referrals generally come from the district superintendents, who in their initial assessment of a situation have identified the need for a neutral third party to provide mediation or facilitation. Since the district superintendents are an integral part of the Conference adjudication process, they serve as arbitrators and not as mediators, who seek to assist the parties in dispute to find a

\textsuperscript{26} From Peacemakers training materials.
\textsuperscript{27} From Peacemakers information materials.
solution through self-determination. Requests may also originate with pastors or lay members of congregations in conflict. Rev Brundige and Mr. Palmer have also individually received referrals from Bishop Ough. While much of the work of the Peacemakers is performed in a volunteer capacity, the district superintendents often have limited funds available for stipends or for expense reimbursement.

The most common types of disputes are (1) between church staff members, (2) between a pastor and an individual or group/faction within the church and (3) between two or more groups, individuals or factions within the congregation.

Although each conflict situation is different, the Peacemakers follow a defined “Church Mediation Process”, defined below.

1. **Defining the Engagement**

There needs to be a clear understanding of who the client is. Is it the church leadership council, the Staff-Parish Relations Committee, staff members or lay members in dispute? What are the identified (not necessarily the real) issues in dispute? Will there be a formal contract? What fees will be paid and by whom? If an official body has engaged the Peacemakers, has the engagement been properly approved under church rules. Do the parties understand that the mediator is neutral in the dispute and operates outside of Conference jurisdiction? In establishing the initial contact with the church, it is important who will be contacted first. If the pastor is involved in the dispute and the first call is to him/her, there could well be a presumption by the other parties that the mediator is biased toward the clergy. Often the first contact is made with the complainant, or with someone in the congregation not involved in the dispute, who is regarded as fair-minded by all sides.
2. **The Assessment**

After the engagement is clearly defined, information gathering commences. Often this involves a suggestion that one or more members of the Peacemakers will visit the church for one or more “listening days”. The parties to the dispute, or perhaps a wider circle of members of the congregation with disparate views on the issues, will be invited by letter to meet individually with the Peacemakers in 30 minute increments, to explain their personal perspective on the issues in dispute. It is explained that their views will be maintained in total confidence, if they desire, and that the Peacemakers will use all the information they receive to prepare a report, summarizing their findings, and providing recommendations on the next steps. It also needs to be stated who will receive the report and how it will be disseminated. That will depend on the terms of engagement and who is the client.

3. **The Implementation Process**

- If traditional mediation is used, involving a finite and manageable number of parties, all participants must agree in advance to written ground rules, which the mediator will enforce.

- Alternatively, when a larger number of people is involved, the parties may meet in “covenant groups” and agree on their common interest in resolving the dispute. Again the ground rules are very important and the role of the facilitator/mediator may be even more challenging.

- A third approach is known as the “circle process”. The goal is for the group to define the beliefs, values, laws or culture they have in common (the Bible, church rules etc.). The facilitator/mediator allows each person to express his/her views, followed by general discussion. This is particularly challenging for the neutral for he/she must maintain the
group’s focus on their common foundation, preventing a relapse into power issues and personal antagonisms.

Following whichever process is employed, the neutral Peacemaker must develop recommendations resulting from this stage of the process.

4. The Agreement/Covenant and the Final Report

The parties must agree on whether it is to be written, to whom it will be communicated and how it will be reported. This is the basis of the agreement which has been reached among the parties to the dispute. The final report will probably be written if the target audience is a small group of people, and verbal if to a larger audience.

Experience has shown that a normal staff dispute may require 1-2 meetings with the parties. A single issue church dispute might encompass 3-4 meetings, while a more complex dispute resolution process may sometimes last for weeks or months.

A summary of the Peacemakers dispute resolution process has been described above. This is implemented when a referral has been made to the group and accepted, relating to a dispute concerning one or more issues in a congregation. The original vision for the Peacemakers, however, included another important component, which was to address the ongoing management of conflict within congregations, to minimize conflict escalating to debilitating or dysfunctional dispute. This was to have been accomplished through the establishment of training resources to equip clergy and lay leaders with the tools necessary to identify ongoing areas of conflict within their congregations and channeling them, when possible, into positive channels for church growth and discernment. The concept was to train a group of individuals, the Peacemakers, who can in turn train a wider circle within the West Ohio Conference. Primary training resources have
been developed nationally by the Lombard Mennonite Peace Institute in Lombard, Illinois (see note #12 above) and JUSTPEACE, a national non-profit organization, based in Washington D.C., under the jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church. Both of these resources will be subsequently discussed at greater length.

Rev. Brundige observed that the Peacemakers have received fewer referrals since the recent Conference reorganization, increasing the geographical responsibilities of the district superintendents, presumably because they are less aware of what is taking place in their substantially larger number of congregations. Probably the greatest reason that more conflict situations are not identified is that congregations are reluctant to admit that problems exist.

“Churches can’t have conflict.”

Mr. Joseph R. Palmer

As mentioned above, Bishop Ough requested that Mr. Palmer join Rev. Brundige to establish the Peacemakers. Mr. Palmer has many years of formal mediation experience in private practice, as President of Mediation Services of Ohio, based in Columbus. This follows a management career in Ohio state government. As part of his mediation practice, Mr. Palmer has participated in many congregational disputes, both through the Peacemakers, and independently. He is regularly engaged by churches in multiple denominations. In addition to a discussion of the work of the Peacemakers, much of which is discussed above, Mr. Palmer enumerated the principal sources of church disputes which he has observed through the years.

1. Disputes between pastors and congregational members and groups of members are commonplace. Sometimes this also involves the Staff-Parish Relations Committee, which

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28 Interview with Mr. Palmer conducted in his office on January 26, 2007.
in the United Methodist Church, serves as the personnel committee for the local
church. Often these disputes relate to power issues in which the pastor and lay leaders
have significantly different ideas about how things should be done in the church. Who
really has authority, the pastor, the church council or the Staff-parish Relations
Committee? An example would be a church in which a long-time pastor had never
received a performance evaluation. His successor, who was aware of past practice, was
approached by the Staff-Parish Committee to conduct an evaluation, feeling that the
Discipline required them to do so. The pastor resented this change and interpreted the
evaluation as a personal attack, both on his authority as head of the church, and on his
experience and abilities. This might lead to the engagement of an outside mediator to
serve as an impartial neutral to work with the committee and the pastor. The parties might
be able to reach a resolution, or failing that, the dispute might have to be referred to the
bishop for adjudication. In other instances, where it is not involved, the Staff-Parish
Committee can serve as a valuable resource in facilitating constructive discussion
between the conflicted staff members.

2. The allocation of space within the church building may be a source of conflict between
different groups within the local church. A church decided to start a contemporary
worship service, but this conflicted with the use of the sanctuary for the traditional
services. The church was able to resolve the issue by adapting its Fellowship Hall into an
appropriate venue for contemporary worship, through the involvement of an outside
mediator. In another instance, a church completed a capital campaign amidst high
expectations that the expansion would accommodate the growing ministries of the church. Great was the disappointment when it was realized that there was still not enough room to do everything that the various groups wanted to accomplish. The leadership of the church realized that they needed an outside mediator, who had no agendas or identification with the conflicting interests, and would be regarded as an impartial facilitator in helping the parties to seek mutually acceptable solutions.

3. A very common source of conflict is often called “Pillars and Pastor”. Many churches have a group of individuals who believe that it is their church and because of their sense of responsibility and importance, they feel that no one should question their view of how things should be done. They may include some of the original church members. A new pastor arrives with a different vision for the church. A positive resolution may be possible through outside facilitation of a parish planning and visioning initiative in which the pastor and other stakeholders come together to seek a common purpose and mission. If the parties are unwilling to do this in good faith, the two sides will seek to outlast each other, leading to a dysfunctional period of tension, disillusionment and stagnation or decline.

4. One of the most emotional types of church conflict is the issue over whether to sell the longstanding church building in a declining neighborhood, which holds many fond memories for church members, in order to move to a more promising location. An even more difficult situation is the suggestion that the congregation should merge with another church, to enhance their financial resources, thereby losing their individual identities. Two congregations of the same denominations, in close proximity to one another in the downtown area of an older inner-ring suburb, agreed on the need to merge with the help
of outside facilitation. They could not determine, however, which church building would be used. The final decision was to sell both buildings and build a new church in a fast growing area outside of town. This resolution prevented either congregation from feeling ill-used, and hastened the growth of a new unified church identity.

5. A vexing source of conflict can arise between a new pastor and a long-serving church secretary. The secretary embodies the history of the church and knows many of the church members. She may also have been close to the previous pastor and is opposed to any changes in her job or in the church generally. In one instance, the pastor had a new vision for the church and began to announce significant changes. He also wanted to change the job responsibilities of the secretary. She responded by becoming a focal point of unrest in the congregation with respect to the new initiatives of the pastor. The pastor realized that she was undermining his leadership, but feared to take action because of her twenty years of service to the church. An outside human resources consultant was engaged to consider not just the secretarial conflict, but the entire staffing situation in the church. She recommended significant changes in job responsibilities for a number of staff positions, after consulting with each staff member. The result was a mutually acceptable reorganization in which the secretary moved into a new position which better utilized her skills and eliminated other responsibilities which she disliked. Without a neutral outside consultant, emotions would probably have prevented a resolution, both of the immediate issues in dispute, and of the underlying conflict in the church.
The Conflict Management Survey

As already mentioned, the primary responsibility for identifying and managing conflict in the West Ohio Conference resides with the eight district superintendents who have administrative and pastoral oversight over the 1200 congregations in the Conference. With respect to dispute resolution, Bishop Ough believes that issues should be resolved as close to the local church, as possible, meaning at the district level, except in extraordinary circumstances.

It was therefore my desire to survey the district superintendents to get their perspectives and experience with respect to conflict management and dispute resolution. Five of the eight participated in the survey.

1. Approximately how often in the course of a year do you become aware of a congregational dispute in your district? What proportion of these situations typically requires intervention by the district or the conference?

1st District – “We usually see about six reported annually. We intervene in about one third of those.”

2nd District – “Some congregations are more prone to conflict at every turn. Those are the ones that usually require outside assistance. It varies from year to year but I would say that every congregation has some conflict and pastors usually share those with me. About 10% benefit from outside assistance.”

30 Book of Discipline, pp. 300-305. In the United Methodist Church, the bishop appoints the district superintendents from the ranks of the ordained elders (clergy). They enjoy delegated authority from the bishop for the administration of the churches in their districts.

31 The survey form, and the individual responses, may be found as Attachment I to this paper.
3rd District – “Varies from 2-3 all the way to 8-9 as a guess as I don’t keep any record that would allow me to give an accurate answer. Also the definition of dispute would differ from one setting to another.”

4th District – “At least every other week, more than 2-3 should have some type of intervention.”

5th District – “Daily. Intervention can take many forms. Sometimes it is a return letter to someone who has written a letter of complaint. Sometimes it is a phone call or email to a pastor to encourage a response. Other times it requires a meeting or series of meetings with key leaders.”

Conclusion

Each district superintendent has his/her own definition of “dispute” and “intervention”. In addition, it would appear that they have different guidelines for their congregations concerning what types of situations should be referred to them. In any case, it is clear that conflict management and dispute resolution are major priorities in the responsibilities of all district superintendents.
2. When action is necessary to address the situation, what forms of intervention have you utilized or recommended to the local church?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Intervention</th>
<th>Number of Districts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilitation by the pastor or other congregational leaders</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitation by the District Superintendent</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitation by a third party from outside the congregation</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediation by an outside neutral party</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of the situation by an outside party</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;32&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>32</sup> Two districts utilize “crisis intervention teams” from the district. One has utilized the Staff-Parish Relations Committees of the local churches in conflict.
3. Indicate the frequency of each of the following causes of local church disputes in your experience, as follows; (F) frequent, (O) occasional, (N) never.\textsuperscript{33}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causes of Local Church Disputes</th>
<th>Number of Districts Responding Frequently</th>
<th>Number of Districts Responding Occasionally</th>
<th>Number of Districts Responding Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pastor v. church member or group of members</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastor v. church lay leaders</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastor v. Staff-Parish Relations Committee</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Conflicts</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict between members/groups of members</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict over political and social issues (i.e. sexuality)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forms of worship/changes in worship</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing demographics in the congregation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing demographics in the neighborhood</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicting needs for the use of church facilities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision to build, expand, or move the church</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision to merge with another congregation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generational differences in the church</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences between new and long time members</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal misconduct of clergy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{33} One of the participating districts did not answer this question.
4. When you feel outside resources are necessary to address a dispute, what resources have you utilized?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outside Resources Utilized</th>
<th>Number of Districts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff from the district or conference</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Peacemakers (Columbus, Ohio)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUSTPEACE Center (Washington, D.C.)^{34}</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alban Institute (Washington, D.C.)^{35}</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lombard Mennonite Peace Institute^{36}</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other outside mediators/facilitators</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other resources: Retired or interim pastors</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other resources: District intervention teams^{37}</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments

Several comments referred to the high cost of using outside mediators and facilitators, and the consulting and training services of the non-profit dispute resolution organizations mentioned above. Local churches generally have no money budgeted

^{34} See Reference on p. 18.
^{35} Description to follow later in text.
^{36} See reference in note #12.
^{37} Clergy, from outside the congregation, appointed by the district superintendent.
for this purpose and the funds available at the Conference and district levels are quite limited.

Outside Dispute Resolution Resources

In addition to the Peacemakers which have been previously discussed in some detail, the survey referenced three principal national organizations that provide conflict management and dispute resolution resources to churches. While the survey indicated a very limited use of these national organizations by churches in the West Ohio Conference, they offer significant experience and valuable materials, which might prove valuable in the future, if funding could be developed to make them available to the districts and congregations of the Conference. In addition to reviewing information posted on each organization’s web site, I conducted telephone interviews with leaders of all three. These interviews were helpful not only in affording me a greater understanding of their work, but also in providing some insightful perspectives on the entire field of conflict management and dispute resolution across the entire spectrum of the church in America today.

JUSTPEACE Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation, based in Washington, D.C., is the only one of the three to be affiliated with a single denomination. It is described as “a mission of the United Methodist Church to engage conflict constructively in ways that strive for justice, reconciliation, resource preservation and restoration of community in and through The United Methodist Church…JUSTPEACE shall be proactive in its efforts to transform conflict by accepting invitations to intervene in conflicts, train church leaders and members of annual conference conflict transformation teams in conflict transformation, connect and nurture a
community of practitioners, and develop resources.”  

While receiving direct financial support from the denomination at the outset, JUSTPEACE is encouraged to charge fees for its services and develop outside sources of support.

I interviewed Mr. Thomas Porter, Executive Director of JUSTPEACE.

The center was established February 2000, recognizing the significant need throughout the church, to address a pressing problem. JUSTPEACE reports “that 26% of churches are highly conflicted and that one out of every 50 churches is sued each year.” Clearly, this refers not to the constructive conflict which leads to growth, but a malaise which destroys congregational and denominational relationships and exhausts resources that should be employed for ministry.

On the other hand, “if we as a church engage conflict constructively, we will reduce the adversarial processes and litigiousness of the Church; reduce the financial and human resources that are diverted from the mission and ministry of the church by adversarial processes, and model a ministry of administration that is consistent with our common calling to be a community of reconciliation and to practice the ministry of reconciliation.”

The first goal of the center in carrying out its mission is through training. This primarily involves seminars and workshops at the conference and district levels. Presentations are typically made to meetings of the bishop’s cabinet in conferences across the church, with a particular emphasis on helping district superintendents recognize early signs of conflict and to understand the resources which are available to build church relationships to manage the conflict. Although Mr. Porter was very familiar with Bishop Ough, his organization has yet to be asked to do training in the

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38 Book of Discipline, p.670.
39 Interview with Mr. Porter conducted by telephone on March 5, 2007.
40 JUSTPEACE web site may be found at www.JUSTPEACEumc.org
West Ohio Conference, although they are working to establish a program with Bishop Hopkins in the East Ohio Conference. He has worked with Philip Moots, the Conference Chancellor, in organizing a Legal Forum and he is knows Eugene Brundige and Joseph Palmer from the Peacemakers. He is very interested in establishing programs in the West Ohio Conference.

The primary instrument to assist conferences, districts and local churches is through the center’s network of independent mediators, who are available, as independent practitioners, to provide mediation and facilitation to churches in conflict. The center also uses the Conflict Transformation Team comprised of carefully selected professionals, which is established by a conference, to engage in complex disputes and engage multiple parties in disputes over complex and multi-faceted issues. This approach is particularly valuable when the bishop or the district superintendent is seen as being personally involved in the dispute. Clearly, as with a mediator, the primary benefit of the team is that it is viewed as a neutral and impartial presence in addressing the issues in dispute.

Serious conflict in the local church is usually identified by the district superintendent, or by the pastor of the congregation. In matters involving staff disputes, the Staff-Parish Relations Committee of the church may advise the district superintendent of the emerging dispute. This early warning system is of critical importance. “Early intervention offers the best possibility for constructive engagement. For a mediator or a Conflict Transformation Team to have the most success, it is helpful for conflict situations to be identified when the majority of persons involved are still at an early stage of the conflict. The mediators or conflict team members are generally members of the conference who have a particular interest or training in “conflict transformation”. They may be chosen from the laity and clergy, or the team may draw on the services of one or more full-time mediators.
In establishing The Conflict Transformation Team\textsuperscript{42}, the conference is charged with funding the work of the team through its annual budget. The budget will include compensation for the administrative leader of the team, the Coordinator, and the ongoing expenses of the team. This funding might be diverted from the conference’s existing legal budget, since the ability of the team to resolve disputes short of litigation should reduce the legal expenses of the conference. In addition, the conference will establish a process to assess the local church for fees to compensate team members during a dispute engagement. The center has developed a comprehensive training manual for the establishment of conflict teams.\textsuperscript{43}

Finally, the center offers several training events each year in different cities, on the topics of “Training in Restorative Justice Principles and Practices” and “Training in Conflict Transformation and Restorative Justice”. A three day Annual Gathering of JUSTPEACE and interested church conflict professionals is held every April.

\textbf{Lombard Mennonite Peace Center}

I interviewed Dr. Richard Blackburn, Executive Director of the center.\textsuperscript{44}

The center, which was founded in 1983, is based in Lombard, Illinois. While associated with the Mennonite church, it is a non-denominational educational resource for conflict resolution in a variety of settings. While remaining faithful to its primary focus of training clergy and laity in the local church to address the whole spectrum of conflict management and dispute resolution, the center has expanded its venues into homes, workplaces and schools. It has developed international programs in Serbia and Great Britain.

\textsuperscript{42} “Establishing a Conflict Transformation Team”, on JUSTPEACE web site at JUSTPEACEumc.org
\textsuperscript{43} “Engage Conflict Well: Training Workshop for Conflict Transformation Teams”, on JUSTPEACE web site, as above.
\textsuperscript{44} Conducted interview with Dr. Richard Blackburn by telephone on March 9, 2007.
Lombard offers an impressive array of training opportunities, consistent with its mission “to proclaim Christ’s good news, the gospel of peace and justice – and to be active in the sacred ministry of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:18)  

As mentioned on page 7 above, the foundation training vehicle is an intensive five day seminar for church leaders, entitled “Mediation Skills Training for Church Leaders”. This training is the qualification necessary to become certified as a Lombard trainer and to serve as an independent contract mediator for Lombard. In addition, eight other 1-3 day programs are taught throughout the country, either by Lombard staff or by certified trainers. The center is also working to formalize its network of mediators, to ensure that it can offer this service wherever it is needed, by providing mediators with a consistent background and qualifications.

Dr Blackburn advised that there is no consistent or comprehensive approach to church conflict management. While each denomination is organized differently, he is discouraged that none has made conflict management a major denomination-wide priority. In the United Methodist Church, he recalled the clergy mediation training he helped to establish with Bishop Ough in Iowa. He also has worked with church leaders in Detroit to establish regular training. Dr. Blackburn would be very interested in working with the West Ohio Conference and will contact Eugene Brundige of the Peacemakers to ascertain whether there would be interest in doing so.

He is very concerned with the increasing societal and family problems in modern society, which are the root cause of the rising anxiety leading to escalating conflict in all of our institutions, including the church. Churches, in particular, are reticent to seek outside resources to address conflict because as the church, they are ashamed to admit that conflict exists. “We shouldn’t have conflict in the church.” Only when the church is willing to face up to the immensity of the

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45 Lombard Mennonite Peace Center web site to be found at www.lmpeacecenter.org
problem and devote the necessary financial and human resources to address it, will systemic progress be made throughout the church. Dr Blackburn advised that Lombard has begun a long term planning process to establish a 20 year goal for their ministry of conflict transformation.

The Alban Institute

Founded in 1974 by Loren Mead, an Episcopal priest, Alban is “an ecumenical, interfaith organization which supports congregations through book publishing, educational seminars, consulting services and research.” Its consulting and publishing resources encompass the entire spectrum of church organization, programs, trends, congregational life and every aspect of church ministry. One aspect of this comprehensive resource base covers church conflict, and in addition to books and articles on the subject, Alban offers a network of outside trained mediators whom they refer to churches in conflict. One of the leading authorities in the field of church conflict, the Rev. Speed Leas, is an author, mediator and consultant for Alban.

I interviewed the Rev. Loren Mead, the founder of the Alban Institute. We focused specifically on the subject of church conflict management and dispute resolution.

Rev. Mead, who has been actively involved in providing conflict management resources to churches for many years, is not optimistic about the future of the field. Like Dr. Blackburn at Lombard, Rev. Mead sees few denominations willing or able to devote the necessary resources to establish an effective program. In judicatory after judicatory, he hears the same litany, “no time, no more resources and poor information” from the churches. Churches are also very reluctant to ask for help, either from their own denominations, or from outside, because they feel that it demonstrates their “incompetence”. Instead the denominations seek to resolve disputes

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46 The Alban Institute web site is found at www.alban.org.
47 Interview with Rev. Mead was conducted by telephone on March 16, 2007.
using their existing staff members, most of whom are not trained in conflict resolution. They need to draw on trained, outside resources to support their own staff which is overwhelmed with other responsibilities. Alban sees its consultants and mediators as “adjunct” staff for the church.

Rev. Mead sees no denominational models for conflict management. The United Methodists have an opportunity to establish a more comprehensive training process, due to their “annual itinerant appointment cycle”. Bishops theoretically reappoint every clergy person every year, on June 1. As only a small minority of clergy actually changes positions each year, Rev. Mead believes it would be a wonderful opportunity to conduct training in conflict management and dispute resolution every June, for those clergy newly appointed to a different church. Instead of having to try to arrange training in a district or conference at different times during the year, it could be centralized in each district at the same time every year. Over a period of several years, all parish clergy would have received this training. Since the parish clergy are the early warning system for escalating conflict, the church would afford everyone the basic tools to identify and address conflict at an early stage. Follow-up training could also be offered for clergy or lay leaders at denominational conferences and events. Such a program should be mandated by the bishop and re-enforced by the district superintendents. Rev Mead reiterated that for this to happen, the Church as a whole must recognize conflict management as one of its most critical priorities. Conflict in the church, as in every human interaction is inevitable. The church needs to be a catalyst for positively addressing conflict. He currently sees few positive trends in this direction in the Church.
Bishop Ough began his ministry in the West Ohio Conference with a vision for conflict management and dispute resolution, following his experience in Iowa. The concept was to establish a comprehensive conference-wide understanding of the nature of conflict in the Church and how it could be addressed. Beginning with two trained and experienced dispute resolution professionals in the conference, Eugene Brundige and Joseph Palmer, a group of clergy and lay people would be trained to provide mediators, facilitators and trainers to the local churches throughout the Conference. Outside training resources and trainers would be employed from JUSTPEACE and the Lombard Institute to train the new group, to be known as the Peacemakers. These trained individuals would be certified to train other clergy and laity in the future, creating an expanding circle throughout the Conference, who would be knowledgeable in conflict management. The members of the Peacemakers would be required to meet high professional standards of training, both formal and by observing, on the job. The Peacemakers would become a supporting community, sharing with and learning from one another during regular meetings.

As Bishop Ough admitted, the vision formulated in 2002 has been only partially realized. The Peacemakers exist and have made a very positive contribution to the churches they have served. Most district superintendents are familiar with their work, and are a source of referrals from local congregations, when they become aware of the need for outside neutral conflict intervention. The group is exceptionally led by Rev. Brundige, who brings a wealth of expertise to the program, obtained over many years.
It is to be hoped that the current status of the conflict management program is a stepping stone to the realization of a complete program. Much from the original vision remains to be achieved. Although forty persons were originally invited to consider joining the Peacemakers, the current numbers is much smaller. Five members are fully trained to accept church engagements, while an additional six persons have begun training. Funding is very limited to compensate mediators, although the district budgets have some funds to provide modest stipends and to reimburse expenses. Training, using outside materials from JUSTPEACE and Lombard has generally not been available, due the cost of the training and budget constraints at the Conference level, due to falling membership.

I believe, however that there are realistic steps which can be taken to expand the conflict management initiative in West Ohio.

1. There should be a conscious effort to recruit additional members of the Peacemakers. Candidates should be solicited from the Conference office, the eight district superintendents and the two United Methodist seminaries located in West Ohio. In order to facilitate the formal training of the new members, Lombard Institute should be engaged to provide the five day program, “Mediation Skills Training Institute for Church Leaders”, to be held in the Columbus area.

The training would be available for future Peacemakers as well as other interested clergy and laity in the Conference. The Columbus area would be a fairly centrally located venue for people from all parts of the Conference. The training could be held at the new conference center at the Methodist Theological Seminary in Ohio (Methesco) in Delaware, which is reasonably priced. Since a minimum number of enrollees are required by Lombard, I would recommend that the Conference jointly sponsor the event with the
East Ohio Conference and other denominations in central and southern Ohio. As the per capita tuition for the seminar is costly, and assuming that there is a shortfall in what the Conference, the districts and the local churches could afford to underwrite, private gifts or grants should be identified to fill the gap. Finally, the cost would be reduced by employing trainers certified by Lombard, but not on the Institute’s staff.

2. Having this larger cadre of trained Peacemakers will enable the group to, in turn, establish an ongoing training program throughout the Conference for pastors, district superintendents and lay leaders. Training could be done at Conference events such as the Annual Conference of West Ohio, district meetings and “cluster meetings” where several congregations meet jointly to discuss matters of common interest. This will also have the benefit of increasing an understanding of the Peacemakers and what resources it can provide to local congregations.

3. For some reason, it has not been deemed appropriate for the Peacemakers to “market” their services. Most of the conflict referrals have come from the district superintendents, who are generally familiar with the group. I would advocate a regular program for members to visit churches and district meetings to describe the importance of positive and proactive conflict management, the benefits of mediation and the resources that are available to the local churches through the Peacemakers. This was done at the Annual Conference of West Ohio in the summer of 2006. It should become a regular agenda item each year.

4. I recommend that the Peacemakers approach United Theological Seminary in Dayton, and Methesco in Delaware to integrate programs on conflict management into their

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48 The Methodist Theological School in Ohio
seminary curricula so that this important issue is introduced to students who are the future pastors of the church.

Unlike other church judicatories, the West Ohio Conference has laid a foundation for the establishment of an effective conflict management and dispute resolution process. It must now move forward, by allocating the necessary financial and human resources to this endeavor. If the Conference will recognize conflict management as a critical priority of its ministry, the process will become a comprehensive and dynamic component of the future of the United Methodist Church in West Ohio.