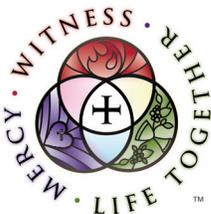


# Facing the Forces of Trouble and Conflict in the Pastoral Ministry

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## by the Rev. Dr. T.J. Rehwaldt

Post-Seminary Applied Learning and Support (PALS) is a collaborative effort of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s Pastoral Education department and LCMS districts to help pastors and their wives in the transition from seminary to congregation. To learn more, visit [lcms.org/pals](http://lcms.org/pals).

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The Rev. Dr. Timothy J. Rehwaldt is pastor of the dual parish of St. John’s Lutheran Church at Popple Creek, Sauk Rapids, Minn. and St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, Foley, Minn., where he has served since 2010.

He previously served as a parish pastor in Kansas, Iowa East, South Minnesota, and Minnesota North. From 1994–2000, Rev. Rehwaldt served as a Mission Developer for the South Wisconsin District.

Rev. Rehwaldt is a 1980 graduate of Concordia College, St. Paul, Minn, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree, and a 1984 graduate of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind., earning his Master of Divinity.

In 2014, Rev. Rehwaldt completed his Doctor of Ministry degree with his doctoral dissertation entitled, “Surviving the Pastoral Ministry in an Atmosphere of Extreme Congregational Conflict.”



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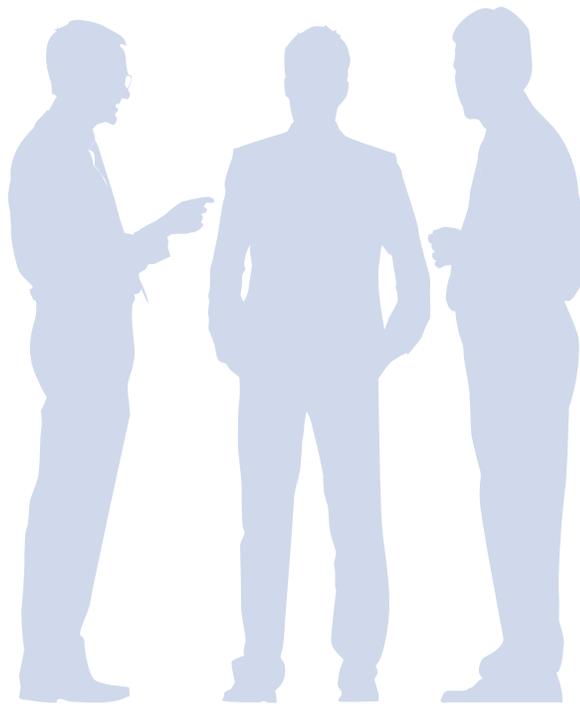
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## Introduction

During this PALS unit we will explore what causes conflict and trouble within the congregation. You'll be given the opportunity to explore how trouble begins, how it increases due to our own actions and reactions towards those who seem to be causing such trouble within the congregation. We will discuss several instances of troubled congregations as examples of how trouble and conflict can begin and gain a foothold within a congregation to the point where it truly hinders the mission and ministry of Word and Sacrament which we all desire to maintain and promote within our congregations.

In this PALS unit we will also discuss ways to confront those who may be causing issues of trouble and conflict within your congregation and search for Biblical models for facing those forces that cause such issues within the congregation. In so doing, we will also explore ways by which we can overcome trouble and conflict in a confessionally Lutheran manner. This will provide for us the opportunity through good pastoral ministry to diminish conflict and trouble in our congregations and ultimately degrade the effects that trouble and conflict have upon the pastoral ministry.



## Session One: What Causes Trouble and Conflict in Congregations

What causes trouble and conflict in the congregation? To be very simplistic the cause of all trouble and conflict in our congregations is SIN. Trouble and conflict is caused by the rejection of God's will in favor of our own. As in every case of sin, sin is caused by giving in to the temptations of the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh. Therefore, trouble in the congregation is always caused by our sin against one another. Such sins occur in the lives of all people, both the members of congregations and of course also in the lives of pastors and their families. In this session we will deal with both of these manifestations of sinful behavior which cause conflict in the congregational ministry to which you and I have been called.

LCMS President, Rev. Matthew Harrison stated in *The Lutheran Witness*:

Satan absolutely loves it when he can twist and distort the relationship between pastor and people. If he can set people a-gossiping, if he can get them to lambaste their pastor, especially to people outside the church, he's giddy with delight. He knows that no disgruntled congregant is going to be doing any inviting to church, much less evangelism. Gripping is much more pleasing to the flesh. Satan knows that if he can bring enough angst to a pastor's life, wife and family, he might pick off the shepherd and cause the sheep to scatter for good! (Rev. Matthew Harrison, LCMS President, *The Lutheran Witness*, November 2012)

The apostle Paul wrote to the early Christian believers in Thessalonica, "We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves" (1 Thess. 5:12-13 ESV).

We also read in 1 Tim. 5:17 that pastors (described in this passage as elders or deacons) are to "be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." Paul earlier states in 1 Tim. 3:2-4 and verse 6 that the man who holds the Office of the Holy Ministry (i.e. the pastor) must be "above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well...He must not be a recent convert or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil." To Titus, the apostle Paul writes in Titus 1:9, "He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also rebuke those who contradict it."

Here is a statement made by congregations from the actual and practical documents of the Divine Call as they fulfill the process of extending a divine call to their pastor.

### **From the congregation to the pastor:**

In the name of the Triune God and by His authority, in order that we might carry out His mission to the world, we hereby authorize and obligate you: To perform the functions of a pastor in an evangelical manner; to aid, counsel, and guide members of all ages and social conditions; to visit the sick and the dying; *to admonish the indifferent and the erring*; to support the members of the congregation as they extend that evangelical ministry to others.

I encourage you now to work through Case Study #1, answer the questions that follow and discuss them among your group.

## Case Study 1

Imagine a pastor, who accepts a call to a congregation where the previous pastor has been allowing a moderate use of an alternative and non-liturgical worship practice, including the use of a musical instrument band which plays the sort of music one might hear on contemporary Christian radio.

The new pastor decides to change this practice within his first year of service. So, he limits the “band” to playing only on fifth Sundays (four times per year) rather than once a month which has been their practice. He instead introduces a replacement worship order from the hymnal.

Upset and angry, the “band” members meet secretly with the board of elders, without the pastor, and they threaten to leave the church unless restored to their regular schedule. They spread the news through the congregation causing an uproar of trouble and conflict.

Some members want to follow the leadership of their pastor; others want the elders to direct the pastor to change the schedule back. Others simply want to recall the divine call of the pastor, send him on his way and look for a new pastor who will do things the way they were done in the past.

### Group Discussion Questions

1. From your perspective as a pastor make an attempt to identify the sinful attitudes and behaviors in this scenario. Think about your own actions or reactions in similar situations real or perceived.

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Don't forget that pastors are sinners also and prone to sinful attitudes just as much as congregants are. So, also make an attempt to identify the sinful attitudes or behaviors present in the pastor's actions or reactions.

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2. Think about this scenario and where it is leading. What kinds of sinful attitudes and behaviors can you predict will occur that would lead to further trouble and conflict in this congregation?

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What consequences can you think of that would make the devil very happy in this situation? Discuss the strategy the devil is using in this scenario.

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**3.** Discuss what the pastor, the band members, the elders and other members might have done differently to avoid this trouble.

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**4.** Now that this trouble has occurred, what needs to happen in order to resolve the conflict?

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## Session Two: How to Face the Forces of Trouble and Conflict

This session we will explore the following three basic strategies for facing the forces of trouble and conflict in the congregation with regards to the pastoral ministry. These may seem obvious to you, but surprisingly, many pastors fail to recognize how each of these strategies working together will help them to experience a less troubled and conflicted ministry.

- › Remain faithful
- › Develop spiritual awareness
- › Confront sin boldly

“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. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 18:15-18).

You know that the power that Christ conveys to the Church, called the **Office of the Keys** is that power to “whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 18:18). This means that those sins which are confronted and confessed are to be absolved and forgiven, but those sins and the resulting trouble and conflict caused by such sins which are not confessed cannot be absolved or forgiven in any effort towards the resolution of the sinful conflict.

For your discussion, read now Case Study #2. In your discussion of this case study, your task

is to once again identify the sinful behaviors. Incorporate the three basic strategies outlined and described earlier: how do you remain faithful, how do you make the congregation spiritually aware of what the devil is seeking to accomplish through this scenario, and how do you boldly confront the sin and the strategies of evil. Also, attempt to develop a plan by which you and your ministry support (elders, spiritual care ministry, etc.) might confront the sinful behaviors and evil strategies of the devil and the sinful flesh in this case study.

### Case Study 2

**The ladies altar guild members ask to speak with you as the pastor; you welcome the invitation because you are new to the parish and want to take every opportunity to get to know members of the congregation.**

**After visiting together for a while the true purpose of the meeting is revealed. The altar guild would like to use white wine for communion, rather than the red that has been used for years. Their reason is very practical: the red wine stains the altar cloths and they would like to make a change.**

**One member visited another church recently where white wine was being used. They want to make sure this practice is permissible and that you as pastor approve of the practice. Knowing that the color of the wine is *adiaphora*, you tell them that you have only one concern about the practice. You know that changes often cause unforeseen consequences, so you ask them to wait until you can discuss it with the board of elders.**

**They agree to wait, but would like a decision soon, because the red wine is almost gone and they would like to buy some white wine they know is on sale at the local liquor store. The elders approve the change, citing that the wine choice has always been the altar guild’s decision.**

The change is announced in the bulletin for two weeks that the wine will be white going forward. It is made clear that both the altar guild and elders along with the pastor have approved the change.

One member not involved in the decision begins immediately to question the practice; she stirs up trouble with her friends in the congregation. She targets you with “making too many changes”, “destroying their traditions” and “not being Lutheran”, and begins to call you “dictatorial”. She upsets many in the congregation over the color of the wine, which she claims has to be red because she remembers that in a Bible study class the previous pastor said it had to be red to represent Jesus’ blood in the Sacrament.

She threatens to “charge you with false doctrine” if the wine is not changed back to red. Before long the elders begin to question their decision and the members of the altar guild begin to say that you demanded the change.

### Group Discussion Questions

1. What sinful attitudes and behaviors are occurring in this scenario?

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2. How would you gather support to boldly confront the sinful behavior?

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3. What might be some unintended consequences of a decision to simply reverse the decision to change the wine in an effort to appease this one member?

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Identify the possible strategies of the devil, the world and the sinful flesh in this scenario?

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4. How could this minor issue gain a foothold for causing even more trouble and conflict within the congregation and have long term consequences?

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## Session Three: Overcoming the Forces of Trouble and Conflict Biblically and Confessionally

Jesus, Himself provides for the Church a clear example of the need to confront sin in any effort made among believers towards facing the forces of trouble and conflict in pastoral ministry.

Trouble and conflict cause disruption in the faithful lives of all individuals, as well as within the lives of congregations. The writers of the Lutheran Confessions recognized this reality, and from the earliest days of the Lutheran Reformation were painfully aware of the struggle that the Church faced with the problem of unresolved sin and conflicts between persons. Therefore, the Lutheran Confessions also take up the doctrinal issue of trouble and conflict caused by sin. Article II of the Augsburg Confession states that original sin exists in all people and therefore is the cause of all evil and sinful conflict.

It is also taught among us that since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers' wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God (AC, 29:1).

Therefore, trouble arises due to such evil lust and inclinations of all persons. When these sins occur within the congregation, they are intended by the devil to disrupt and destroy the effectiveness of the Church and its mission to bring the saving message of Jesus Christ to the world. Just as Satan's Genesis desire was to disrupt the relationship of God and man, the devil continues among the Church today to use sinful

conflict to disrupt and destroy the relationships of believers with one another and also ultimately the relationship of God and His Church on earth.

The Lutheran Confessions also direct us to the doctrine of the Office of the Keys as Christ's power which is needed to overcome sinful trouble and conflict brought about and caused by the efforts of the devil within the Church and especially within the local congregation:

“For human nature is far too weak to be able by its own strength to resist the devil who holds enthralled all who have not been freed by faith. Nothing less than Christ's power is needed for our conflict with the devil” (AP, (Apology) 126:138).

“Yet the preachers on our side diligently teach that confession is to be retained for the sake of absolution (which is its chief and most important part), for the consolation of terrified consciences, and also for other reasons” (AC, (26) XXVI, 63:13).

The Word of God is very clear about confronting the sin of fellow Christians. For example St. Paul writes: “Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:6-7). The real and devastating spiritual danger with unresolved sin and sinful conflict as evidenced in the case studies of this PALS unit is that it cannot resolve itself. It will instead spread throughout the whole congregation and corrupt the whole ‘lump’ which quickly results in even more trouble and conflict. This can have devastating results for the ministry of the pastor and the congregation.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians writes: “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness” (Gal. 6:1). Confrontation of true sin will result in either a rejection of those who confront the sin of a

Christian brother or sister, or the confrontation of sin will result in the acceptance of the knowledge of sin which will then lead to what the Church teaches as true repentance leading to faithful confession and absolution. Also, Jesus teaches the Church in the Gospel of Luke: “If your brother sins, rebuke (confront) him, and if he repents, forgive (absolve) him” (Luke 17:3).

Specifically, it is the task of faithful pastors and the spiritual leadership of their congregations to confront sinfulness by the preaching and teaching of the Word of God and the offering of the Holy Sacraments in order that there might be faithful repentance, confession of sins and true absolution. It is the duty of all faithful pastors to provide the proper understanding of the Office of the Keys for: “The keys are a function and power given to the church by Christ to bind and loose sins, not only the gross and manifest sins but also those which are subtle and secret and which God alone perceives” (Smalcald Articles, Part III, VII, 311:1).

Yet, even though pastors are equipped through the Office of the Ministry and the Office of the Keys to confront all sin, and specifically the sin that causes trouble, still the reality exists that some may not be willing to receive the confrontation of their sin even when the steps of Matthew 18 and other scriptural procedures are used. The Lutheran Confessions recognized this reality:

Therefore, when I urge you to go to confession, I am simply urging you to be a Christian. If I bring you to this point, I have also brought you to confession. Those who really want to be good Christians, free from their sins, and happy in their conscience, already have the true hunger and thirst.” (Large Catechism, 460:32)

Rev. John Pless writes in *Lutheran Theology*, “Confession admits defeat and so leaves the penitent open for a word that declares righteousness, a verdict which justifies. That word is called absolution ... The focus in confession and absolution is not on the confession per se, but on the absolution”. (“Justification by Faith in

Action.” *Lutheran Theology: An Online Journal*)

The Lutheran pastoral approach to conflict resolution therefore must remain always in the confrontation of sin which leads to true repentance and confession and absolution.

Please read Case Study #3 and discuss the questions that follow.

### Case Study 3

**A seasoned pastor relates this experience. After many years of faithfully serving his congregation, he is confronted by an irate member who accuses him of not being a very good pastor.**

**The pastor tries to engage him in conversation to understand why the member is so upset. But all that he accomplishes is to agitate the member further. He ends up hearing a tirade of accusations ranging from poor preaching and teaching, to an inability to comfort people in need, lacking of member visitation skills, not being friendly and even being too old and behind the times for their congregation.**

**The pastor made a general apology for not measuring up to the member’s expectations and moved on. But the trouble was not an isolated event.**

**Eventually, he began to get other complaints about his pastoral ministry, indicating to him that the congregation was growing tired of his ministry among them. The pastor called his district president and visited with his circuit visitor. They both encouraged him to seek a call, stating that he may have just out-stayed his welcome in the congregation and was no longer effective. The pastor was uncomfortable with this advice, holding to the belief that by the divine call he was permanently called to the congregation until God decided that he should ‘move on’.**

**In the months that followed he learned that the member who had challenged his abilities as a**

**pastor was going through a divorce and had been unfaithful to his wife. The pastor recalled how he had sensed something was wrong when the man's wife had come in for a visit, although she had not revealed any marital problems to the pastor. The pastor had also recently preached on the issue of marital fidelity and was planning to host a marriage workshop for the congregation.**

**The pastor came to believe that the irate member was upset because he felt that his particular sin was being called out publicly and that the pastor had conspired with the member's wife regarding the divorce. Therefore this member had begun a campaign of complaining about the pastor that was starting to take hold in the mindset of the congregation.**

### **Group Discussion Questions**

**1.** What spiritual forces are causing the trouble and conflict in this scenario? What sinful behaviors are happening as a result of those spiritual forces? Remember there are several players: the pastor, the irate member, the wife, the district and circuit leadership, and the general members of the congregation.

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**2.** How would you seek to confront this sinful trouble and conflict in the life of the irate member and in the general congregation?

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**3.** How could the pastor face these forces of trouble and conflict without revealing the situation to others in the congregation (i.e. elders) publicly? Or should he? Why or why not?

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Is there any benefit to confronting the situation privately, and for what purpose?

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**4.** Why is the irate member attacking the pastor? What spiritual forces are influencing the member? And, what needs to occur so that the pastor can effectively minister to the man and the congregation?

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## Session Four: Preventing Trouble and Conflict From Gaining A Foothold

### Part One: Facing the Forces of Trouble and Conflict in the Life of the Pastor

In the previous sessions of this PALS unit it has been made clear that the real and persistent issue of trouble and conflict begins, grows and continues in the life of the congregation due to unresolved sin and a lack of true confrontation of those sins, which leads to the confession of sin, real repentance and finally the forgiveness of sins through sincere absolution.

Pastors also can be led by the devil into sin and are also in need of true confession and absolution. The Apostle Paul writes to Timothy regarding this issue as he encourages Timothy to confront those who hold the office of pastor, “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear” (1 Tim. 5:20). To Titus, Paul writes, “For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers... They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families (or congregations) by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not teach... rebuke them sharply that they may be sound in the faith” (Titus 1:10-13). Although this may apply to all Christians, St. Paul specifically addresses those who hold the teaching ministry and are “upsetting whole families” which indicates that those referred to are possibly those who hold the offices of spiritual leadership: pastor, teacher, administrator or elder. The sins which come from those in such positions of spiritual leadership also need to be confronted that they may repent, confess and be absolved for the good of their own souls and for the good of the Church-at-large.

The Lutheran Confessions also acknowledge and confront the issue of sinful behavior leading to sinful conflict among those in positions of

spiritual leadership, and the need to confront such sin as a means to bring such persons to true repentance, confession and absolution.

Here are a few statements from the Lutheran Confessions which make it clear that spiritual leaders are not exempt from the sort of sinful behavior and the teaching of false doctrine which may lead to sinful conflict within the congregations or the assemblies of congregations they serve.

Again, although the Christian church, properly speaking, is nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints, yet because in this life many false Christians, hypocrites, and even open sinners remain among the godly, the sacraments are efficacious even if the priests who administer them are wicked men, for Christ himself indicated, “The Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat” (Matt. 23:2). (AC, VIII, 33:1)

But whoever teaches and lives otherwise than as the Word of God teaches, profanes the name of God among us (Small Catechism, LP 1st Pet., 346:5).

Besides this public, daily, and necessary confession, there is also the secret confession which takes place privately before a single brother. When some problem or quarrel set us at one another’s throats and we cannot settle it, and yet we do not find ourselves sufficiently strong in faith, we may at any time and as often as we wish lay our complaint before a brother, seeking his advice, comfort, and strength (Large Catechism, 458:13).

### Part Two: Facing the Forces of Trouble and Conflict through Congregational Awareness

According to Kent Crockett in his book, *Pastor Abusers: When Sheep Attack Their Shepherd*, “Pastor abuse is the church scandal that no one is talking about. The mistreatment of clergy is as horrifying as it is secretive, and the casualties are reaching epidemic proportions. Over 19,000

pastors get out of the ministry every year. When the sermon ends on Sunday, over 350 pastors will be gone before the next Sunday service begins” (Crockett 2012, 9). Later, he writes; “By the time you finish reading this book more than a hundred fellow pastors will have been tossed to the curb with nowhere to go and no one to turn to” (Crockett 2012, 21).

There is no reason to suspect that the situation within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is any different. Statistics from the LCMS Office of Rosters and Statistics show that as of January 2014 as many as 163 pastors left the congregational ministry during the period of 2011-2013 and remained in candidate status (CRM) (Source: LCMS Office of Rosters and Statistics, January 2014). Although not conclusive, it is reasonable to conclude that many of these resignations were due to congregational conflict. I have witnessed many firsthand reports from across the synod by dozens of pastors and congregations who tell of resignations due to their experiences of congregational conflict. Many resigning pastors leave their divinely called pastoral offices due to trouble within the congregations they serve.

Use whatever time you have left in this PALS unit to read the following real life Case Study #4 dealing with trouble and conflict. Assess the consequences of the unresolved sinfulness presented in this case study and spend some time developing strategies based on the ideas presented earlier in this PALS unit and how they would turn back the devil’s evil intent.

#### **Case Study 4**

**The youth group of Pastor Tom’s congregation has a history of taking mission trips to Mexico to serve the Lord and His Church through their acts of kindness and to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the past Pastor Tom has left the decisions for the destination, the travel arrangements and the time frame of the travel into the hands of the adult youth leaders and the elected youth representatives of the congregation. As the time came for another**

**youth group mission trip, the pastor began to inquire as to the plans for the upcoming trip. The youth had chosen a location and a mission project. They were to go to a city in southern Mexico, where the need was to help build a school. The heavy work of construction was already done, the main building was already built and what needed to happen was light construction work for the youth, building interior stud walls and adding sheetrock and paint. The youth had a youth leader who was a home builder himself and so they had decided this was a good project for them.**

**As the plans were moving along for the youth to make the trip some problems arose. First, the cost of the travel was far beyond the youth’s original estimates. Secondly, the timing of the trip conflicted with a major holiday so Pastor Tom would not be going on the trip for the first time in all his years with the congregation. So, it was decided that the home builder adult would lead the youth mission trip, along with a married couple who was new to the congregation but had volunteered to work with the youth ministry program. Pastor Tom saw no problem in this, for he knew the home builder adult and the younger couple quite well. Notices of the plans had been sent to youth and parents, permission forms were filled out and approved with signatures from youth and parents. Airline tickets were ordered and travel arrangements were progressing towards the upcoming trip.**

**One evening Pastor Tom was asked to attend the youth group’s meeting with parents to go over the final plans for the mission trip, which he did. Upon entering the room he could sense that there was an atmosphere of tension. Apparently, some of the parents had become upset with the plans for the trip. Essentially, they believed the cost was too much and they did not trust the adult leadership. Some of the parents began to say that their youth would not participate in the youth mission trip unless the plans were changed. They wanted the trip to be less costly, but more than that they wanted the time for the trip to be changed so that Pastor**

Tom could go along. The problem was that airline tickets had already been ordered and the fees to change would be expensive. Other plans also would have to be cancelled.

One parent claimed that she had been completely left out of the planning of the trip even though she had volunteered after the last trip to go on the next trip. She claimed she had been left out because the pastor did not like her and that he favored the new people more. She had gathered support for her opinion already before the meeting and threatened to plan a separate trip for those who wanted to go with her. Accusations began to fly. The home builder leader was accused of wanting to go on the trip to spend time with teenage girls. The young married couple was told they had not been members long enough to be youth leaders. The pastor was accused of not being a good pastor and leader because he let the youth plan this kind of trip without his supervision.

Eventually, the group siding with the woman who wanted to plan a different trip walked out of the meeting. They demanded to have their deposit money back and to have access to the already purchased airline ticket information so they could make the necessary changes. The pastor and the church council finally took up the issue and refunded the money and gave over the flight information. Two trips were now being planned. This caused a great deal of strife in the congregation.

### Group Discussion Questions:

1. What spiritual forces are leading the youth and their parents in trouble and conflict in this scenario?

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2. What do you project will happen to the pastoral ministry of this congregation if this conflict is not resolved biblically according to true confrontation of sin, confession and absolution?

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How might a father confessor help the pastor in this scenario?

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3. What actions by the pastor may have led to some of this trouble and conflict? Are there steps he could have taken to reduce the possibility of this trouble beginning?

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**4.** What should the pastor do at this point to bring about resolution? Is there anyone he should talk to and boldly confront with sin and the need for repentance?

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**6.** How might the steps of remaining faithful, bringing spiritual awareness, and the bold confrontation of sin have helped this case?

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**5.** What policies might be put in place to reduce the opportunity for the devil to cause this sort of trouble and conflict in the future?

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## Conclusion

For more information or for the congregational use of a study guide entitled “Troubled Churches: What’s the Story?” which utilizes five real world pastoral stories, similar to the case studies you have just discussed but longer and with more details, you may contact me at [pastortj@live.com](mailto:pastortj@live.com).

It is my prayer that by exposing the strategies that the devil has used in congregations to attack the pastoral ministry of faithful pastors and their congregations, many other congregations will grow to resist and avoid the devil’s attacks and be spared from the devastating results of trouble and conflict.

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1333 S. Kirkwood Road  
St. Louis, MO 63122-7295  
888-THE LCMS (843-5267)  
[infocenter@lcms.org](mailto:infocenter@lcms.org)  
[lcms.org](http://lcms.org)