

Equipping University Students to be Peacemakers

(Note: I will be reading only the words in larger print.)

For 67 years I have been observing our Seventh-day Adventist Church. As the son of a pastor, as a pastor, and as a university professor I have seen and experienced many things, too many of them negatively impacted by mishandled conflict. Increasing large numbers of disillusioned church members are deciding not to identify as Seventh-day Adventists. In the last 7 years more than 29,000 of them have been “dropped” in the North American Division.¹ A high percentage of this number is made up of disappointed graduates from our colleges and universities. This situation certainly stimulates me to consider my role and relevance as a religion teacher in our denomination.

Too many of the Seventh-day Adventists I know have been taught more about their good fortune in *having the truth* than about the humbling experience of letting the God of truth have them. Healthy Christian relationships result where the Holy Spirit is allowed to apply God’s truths in ways that bear the bonding fruit of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, . . .” (Gal 5:22-23). Spiritually abusive relationships laced with damaging conflicts result where people possess “the truth” and self-righteously wield it on others. Unfortunate numbers of our leaders and teachers have had an unhealthy appetite for advancing unique theological beliefs without making sure that they are adequately grounded in balanced, nurturing relationships with God and with others. “Being right” is often very wrong when it comes to genuine, loving relationships.

We send mixed signals. Our denomination has not made it absolutely clear that none of our beliefs is of any value whatsoever unless they orbit God’s core truth as stated by Jesus in Matt 22:36-40. All Bible teachings are held together in delicate balance by this demonstrated love for God and each other. Without these genuine relationships of applied love Paul points out that our multiple fundamental truths and prophetic understandings are meaningless noise (1 Cor 13).

Our denomination’s foundational declaration on healthy relationships is found at the very heart of our 28 Fundamental Beliefs. Statement 14, *Unity in the Body of Christ*, begins with these stirring words:

The church is one body with many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor,

¹ The current Membership Statistics of the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church are posted online at <https://www.nadsecretariat.org/statistics/>.

male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation. . . .

When will we practice what we are preaching? Ironically, while we talk a lot these days about unity with frequent accusations of blame for disunity, practical education in this area is mostly lacking.²

The role of theology teachers in our denomination is to lead in balancing, demonstrating, and educating on the wonderful teachings of the Bible. We are called to go beyond the making of profound statements to the showing of how Biblical doctrines are applied and practiced in sanctified, loving, everyday living. Together in our colleges and universities we currently aim to educate on loving, everyday living in numerous ways.

One of my ways has been through teaching a class in Christian conflict resolution. Since 2007 when it was first offered, 565 students, including all Religious Studies majors, have taken or are taking this course. It is devoted to showing how all conflicts provide opportunities for glorifying God, serving other people, and growing to be more like Jesus. It's devoted to showing in detail how students can make the most of these opportunities for caring relationships.

Research

In August, 2013 Dr. Darren George, a professor of Psychology and an experienced quantitative researcher partnered with me to do research on my class, RELG 242 Conflict Resolution. The purpose of this study has been to discover how well the stated course objectives are being achieved. Those course objectives reach beyond information-sharing to life transformation as the course aims at influencing students to deal with their multiple conflicts constructively.³

So far a total of 289 students (144 females and 145 males) have participated in our study and 54 more students are currently in the study. Through an analysis of the resulting data, Dr. George and I have determined that the conflict resolution-related beliefs, skills, and behaviors of participating students have improved substantially as a

² The current Sabbath School quarterly, *Oneness in Christ*, is a welcome exception. Hopefully, it is being taught and applied world-wide as principal contributor, Denis Fortin, intended when he wrote for it.

³ According to the course description, "This course studies the sources of conflict and examines strategies and techniques associated with positive interpersonal and substantive conflict transformation. The focus is on a process which assists conflict participants in clarifying attitudes and modifying behaviours so that trust increases and conflict is transformed into opportunity. [Burman University Academic Calendar & Programming Planning Guide / 2018- 2019](#), 195. According to the objectives statements of the course outline, students who complete the course will be able to "explain the causes and dynamics of interpersonal and substantive conflict; better understand their conflict-related feelings and responses; establish positive, lasting personal reconciliation habits; and be prepared to engage in effective conflict coaching and negotiation."

result of taking this course.⁴ Consequently, during the summer and fall of 2018 we authored a paper on our research and have submitted it for publication to the *Journal of Research on Christian Education*.⁵ Much of what follows flows from that paper.

We started our research by creating the *Conflict Resolution Questionnaire* found in the appendix. The questionnaire is made up of 28 questions, 26 of which are directly related to conflict. The other 2 questions (items 21 and 22) are demographic in nature. One identifies gender and, because participants are instructed to answer the final 6 questions in the context of a personal relationship, the other identifies that student-selected relationship (spouse, dating partner, roommate, sibling, parent, or other). The conflict-related questions are divided between 19 cognitive/attitudinal questions (items 1-4 and 6-20) and 7 behavioral outcome questions (items 5 and 23-28). Of the 26 conflict-related questions, 12 are reverse coded (items 1, 3, 7-9, 11-12, 14-16, and 18-19). Students are invited to fill out the questionnaire voluntarily twice, once on the first and again on the last day of the course.

Results

Post-test scores have shown improvement on all 26 conflict questions and on 23 of these the improvement has been significant. The most noteworthy improvement took place on the following items: #3 *Many conflicts arise because persons involved have different perspectives about the situation*, $M_s = 4.77$ vs. 5.37 , $z = 8.415(178)$, $p < .001$; #6 *It is possible for conflict to have a positive effect on the participants*, $M_s = 4.50$ vs. 5.24 , $z = 8.03(196)$, $p < .001$; #9 *If I love someone it means that I will avoid any conflict with him or her*, $M_s = 4.03$ vs. 4.87 , $t(205) = -7.76$, $p < .001$; #12 *When attempting to resolve conflict it is best to ignore people's personal feelings*, $M_s = 4.36$ vs. 5.19 , $z = 7.51(162)$, $p < .001$; and #15 *When in conflict, committed Christians both want the same outcome—God's will*, $M_s = 3.62$ vs. 4.56 , $t(209) = -8.21$, $p < .001$.

The contrasts between women's and men's conflict-related perceptions before and after the course are of interest. The pre-test revealed that before the course men scored significantly lower than women in feeling concern about conflict differences (item 28), in believing that during conflict it is best to acknowledge personal feelings (item 12), and thinking that it is wise to bring sensitive issues to the surface (item 4). Men were appreciably more confident than women that they already had a viable conflict resolution plan in place (item 23) and that they were already effective at resolving conflict (item 26). After the course the post-test revealed that gender differences in these areas were significantly diminished in positive ways.

⁴ My earlier report on this research at the 2017 West Coast Religious Teachers Conference held at Walla Walla University was not as positive as this report. The reason is that one of Dr. George's students had been assigned to interpret the data and that analysis was faulty. Later, when Dr. George analysed the data himself, he became much more enthusiastic about this research project and suggested that we write it up and submit it for publication.

⁵ Titled *The Influence of an Undergraduate Conflict-Resolution Course to Effect Change in Student Cognitions, Attitudes and Behaviors in their Personal Relationships*, this paper is considerably more detailed and technical than the one you are reading.

Interestingly, in four behavioral-response areas the post-test results showed married and dating students to be dramatically superior in their responses to students who chose to answer the questions in terms of other relationships. Married and dating students were more likely to have a conflict resolution plan in place (item 23), they were more likely to follow that plan (item 24), they were quicker to address conflict issues (item 25), and they were more effective in actually resolving conflicts (item 26).

The results of the latest (2017) course offering in this study were exceptional compared to the results of previous offerings. The mean improvement of the 19 cognitive/attitudinal questions for the preceding seven courses was .419 whereas the improvement for the 2017 course was .610; $t(288) = 3.957, p < .001$. The contrast was even more marked for the seven behavioral questions. The first seven courses had a mean improvement of .412 while the 2017 course improved .649; $t(288) = 4.759, p < .001$.

The improvement of the 2017 course appears to have resulted from changes to the student assignments. During the summer of 2017 Dr. George suggested that I adjust my assignments based on his analysis of our research up to that point. I accepted and acted on his suggestions to make the assignments more practice-oriented. For example, I began to require written conflict resolution plans with periodic updates based on what the students were learning in class. I also asked students to report on the extent to which they were following their plans and on how well their plans were working. We attribute the improved research results to these assignments which were aimed more specifically than earlier assignments at putting the conflict resolution theory into real-life practice.

Recommendation

Perhaps more Seventh-day Adventist Theology departments could consider offering an undergraduate conflict resolution course open to all students. Currently the only such undergraduate course in our division is offered at Burman University. Other Theology programs in our division offer two graduate level conflict management courses for Religion majors.⁶

Among Christians, conciliation skills are basic to the maintenance of all healthy relationships. They are not automatically acquired as Christians grow older. Conflict resolution is not an advanced topic for specialists even though advanced courses in this

⁶ CHMN 526 Conflict Management in the Church is offered at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary of Andrews University and RELP 556 Conflict Resolution in the Local Church is offered by the Richards Divinity School of La Sierra University. In North American Division colleges and universities other disciplines offer 5 undergraduate courses on conflict resolution as follows: La Sierra University (Business and Psychology), Pacific Union College (Social Work), Southwestern Adventist University (Psychology), and Union College (Business). Three graduate courses are offered by Andrews University (Social Work), La Sierra University (Business), and Loma Linda University (Marriage and Family).

area are certainly appropriate. I tell my students, "If you want to accurately take your spiritual temperature and find out how your sanctification is progressing, look at yourself during a conflict."

Members in our denomination have large numbers of damaging conflicts. These are found abundantly in our families and workplaces. They are numerous in our denominational schools, hospitals, churches, conferences, unions, divisions, and General Conference. What if we were producing numerous university-educated Christian conciliators? This semester at Burman University more than 10% of the total student body is enrolled in RELG 242 Conflict Resolution. At least the same number of other currently attending students have already taken the course.

In my 28 years of pastoring and 12 years of teaching I have found that university students are far more open to learning how to resolve conflict than are other church members. I can soak large numbers of motivated university students in Biblical conflict resolution material three times a week for three months straight as they learn to enhance their relationships. This is habit change, life transformation territory. On the other hand it has been very difficult for me to motivate small numbers of non-university church members to sporadically attend a few basic sessions.

In their disputes numerous Adventists I have known, people conversant with the Bible and well-acquainted with Seventh-day Adventist doctrines, have exhibited too little of what the Bible teaches on conflict transformation. And many of these people have been leaders. Why not teach Christian conflict resolution values and skills to our young members and future leaders? Large numbers of our college and university students are ready and motivated to become peacemakers.

Appendix

CONFLICT RESOLUTION QUESTIONNAIRE

I agree that my participation in this survey is entirely voluntary and that at any point I may choose not to complete this questionnaire and to discard it. I understand that my confidentiality and anonymity will be strictly guarded.

The following operational definition of conflict assumes interaction between two or more people:

Conflict: A difference of opinion or purpose that frustrates someone's goals or desires.

Comment: There are many different responses to conflict as defined above. One common response is what we call an "Antagonistic Exchange" (AE) or a fight or an argument. There are many other possibilities, that without a conflict resolution plan in place, are negative: A person may become ill, depressed, begin passive-aggressive actions against the other, become hardened, or "stonewall" that is become silent or unresponsive.

Keep this definition in mind as you answer questions below:

Question	Response					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Slightly agree	Slightly disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. In any close relationship, there will be painful differences of opinion.						
2. These differences will invariably lead to an antagonist exchange between partners.						
3. Many conflicts arise because persons involved have different perspectives about the situation.						
4. In general, it is best not to bring sensitive issues to the surface because this seems to increase conflict.						
5. When in a conflict with someone, I feel a strong urge to win.						
6. It is possible for conflict (as defined above) to have a positive effect on the participants.						
7. When I get angry during a conflict I am likely to say things that may cause serious damage.						
8. The best decisions come after vigorous debate of contrasting perspectives.						
9. If I love someone it means that I will avoid any conflict with him or her.						
10. Intensely held opinions are a breeding ground for conflict.						
11. Sharp differences of opinion are normal when people come together in organizations.						

Question	Response					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Slightly agree	Slightly disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
12. When attempting to resolve conflict it is best to ignore people's personal feelings.						
13. The best decisions (when in conflict) are made with a clear head and rational mind while stepping away from feelings.						
14. Many conflicts arise because people are selfish and want their own way.						
15. When in conflict, committed Christians both want the same outcome—God's will.						
16. Conflict is out of place in the church.						
17. If all church members were converted, there would be few differing opinions and conflict would						
18. A business man has stated: "We don't get what we want, we get what we negotiate." Do you agree?						
19. The ability to negotiate painful differences is a skill that can be learned and developed over time.						
20. To resolve painful differences requires an understanding of the best methods and the best settings to resolve such differences.						

Please answer the following questions in the context of the relationship with your spouse (if married), dating partner (if you are in a dating relationship) or someone with whom you are in a close relationship (if you are neither married nor dating).

21. Your gender: male female

22. Please identify the nature of the relationship with the "other" person:

spouse dating partner roommate sibling parent other(specify) ____-

23. To what extent do you have a plan in place designed to resolve differences-of-opinion between you and your partner?

- A plan? A plan? What's that?
 That might be a good idea!
 General ideas . . . "be nice, try to listen, don't get mad"
 General guidelines of how to interact are in place
 A fairly clear plan that we both try to follow
 A clear plan is specified that we both agree to

24. When differences-of-opinion arise, how well do you adhere to the plan described in the previous question?

- I already told you, I don't have a plan
 Not at all
 Only occasionally
 About half the time
 More often than not
 Quite consistently with only occasional flops

25. To what extent are the two of you able to get around to addressing differences that need to be resolved?

- We avoid conversation about the issues at all cost
- We address the issue eventually but only after long periods of agony and distress
- We address the issue after moderate periods of delay and distress
- There is a tendency to delay but we get around to it
- We deal with such differences fairly promptly
- We are eager to resolve such differences and get at them right away

26. Once you get around to it, how effective are the two of you at resolving differences?

- Total disaster
- Rarely do we actually resolve anything
- We achieve resolution less than half the time
- We achieve resolution about half the time
- We achieve resolution more often than not
- We achieve resolution all the time or most of the time

27. How often do the two of you deal with differences that require resolution?

- Daily or more often
- More than once a week
- About once a week
- Two or three times a month
- About once a month
- Less often than once a month

28. How much personal distress do you feel about your differences?

- Severe distress
- Disturbing distress
- Moderate distress
- Occasional distress
- Feelings of distress are rare
- Essentially none