

An All-Too-Familiar Story

The prophets foresaw the church as a peaceable kingdom. A place where swords and spears have no purpose. A place where lambs snuggle up to lions, and grizzlies frolic with toddlers.

But we've not yet attained the prophets' vision. We still have swords and spears aplenty. And in case you

haven't noticed, there's a new type of conflict in the air. It's a battle over styles. Styles of worship. Styles of music. Styles of preaching. Styles of leadership. Styles of architecture. Styles of evangelism. In short, an on-going squabble over how to "do church."

Fortunately, the parties rarely resort to brinkmanship. They bicker. They complain. But they usually avoid a wholesale rift. Instead, they settle for skirmish lines drawn here, then there in the church.

Leaders, caught in the middle, feel a mounting exhaustion. They dash from flash point to flash point, trying to contain the conflict. "All I do," they moan, "is put out brush fires."

And what is sparking this tension? Where does it come from? Most leaders offer a one word explanation. The primary problem, they say, is diversity. Too many people with too many ideas about how things ought to be done.

To see what they mean, let's do a little eavesdropping at a nearby congregation. Well call it the Harmony Heights Church. They've just

When pressed to identify the greatest source of tension in today's church, leaders offer a surprisingly consistent answer. The primary culprit, most say, is diversity: too many people with too many different ideas about how things ought to be done.

formed a search committee to find a new pulpit minister. And Fred, a successful businessman, is chairing the committee.

They've just begun their first meeting. And as we join the conversation, Fred is opening with some personal observations.

Fred: What I'm looking for in a new preacher is someone who can get things moving and put this church on the map. I think that boils down to four criteria.

First, we need someone with a proven track record of achievement. A man of vision who can help us connect with the community. Second, he should be well-trained and well-educated. Not an embarrassment around town, like others we've had in the past.

Third, we need someone who brings a contemporary feel to our worship. I'm particularly interested in the kinds of sermons he delivers. I'm looking for sermons that are easy to follow and relevant to the daily lives of our people. Practical sermons with lots of "how-to" applications.

Fourth, we need someone to get us out of our rut. Someone not afraid to try something new. Someone who can generate fresh ideas and make a positive impression on visitors. Someone enthusiastic, with an excitement that's contagious.

Tom, a longtime member at Harmony Heights, breaks in impatiently at this point. He has his own opinion, and it's nothing like Fred's.

Tom: We don't need some cheerleader to get things going around here. Our problem is that we've gone soft and wishy-washy on everything we ever stood for.

And a lot of it has to do with those last two "educated" guys we brought in here. I heard enough psychology and sociology from them to last me a lifetime. With that kind of mumbo-jumbo from the pulpit, no wonder we don't know what we stand for any more.

Lecturing now, he jabs the air with his index finger to punctuate his points.

Tom: Let me tell you what we need. We need someone willing to take a tough stance and do some no-nonsense preaching. It's time for someone who will lay things squarely on the line. I'm looking for someone willing to call a spade a spade and let the

chips fall where they may. And if feelings get hurt in the process, so be it.

Sarah, who is serving on her first major committee in the church, has been hesitant to speak up. She even questions whether she ought to be part of this group. She knows for certain that Tom considers it out of place to have a woman on the committee. But his challenge to Fred has given her an opening to say her piece.

Sarah: I'm not sure I want someone as "hard-nosed" as Tom's talking about. But I do agree with him that we've been headed in the wrong direction. The church is drifting from its moorings. We're losing our identity.

It's time to bring in someone who knows the Word and is interested first and foremost in preaching the truth. Someone who can get us back to first principles.

And as for change, Fred, we've spent too much time on that subject already. Things are slipping out of control around here. What's worse, no one seems to know where all this change is taking us. We need to quit talking about being relevant to our culture and start talking about being faithful to the Lord.

As Sarah concludes, everyone turns to Steve, the only person yet to speak. He pauses reflectively, then starts.

Steve: So far I've not heard one thing about this man's heart for people. If he loves the Lord and has the fruit of the Spirit in his life, these other things will take care of themselves. Personally, I'm not worried about his preaching skills so much as I want someone who builds a spontaneous, caring atmosphere for worship.

Leaning forward, Steve's tone becomes more passionate.

Steve: You know, we have a lot of hurting people in this church. We need someone who can nurture us and "bind up the wounds." Someone to help us become the kind of tender and compassionate church Jesus calls us to be.

I want us to create a feeling that we are genuinely family here. And who knows, maybe a woman can do that better than a man.

Steve's comment about a woman catches everyone off-guard. Sarah lets out a small gasp. She just heard another mooring give way. Tom rolls his eyes in disbelief. "More 'wishy-washy' nonsense," he mutters to himself. And Fred, charged with chairing the group, now feels that no one around the table supports either him or his vision for the future.

Familiar Voices?

What are the odds that the Harmony Heights search committee will remain harmonious over the next few weeks? Not very high. Right now they are warily eyeing one another. "I can't believe what I'm hearing," they tell themselves. "Where on earth are these people coming from?" It's now apparent to everyone that Fred has his hands full.

And not just Fred. Any of us in church leadership face similar challenges. After all, you probably heard some familiar voices in this dialogue. More than likely you know a number of people who think like Fred. And what about Tom and Sarah and Steve? Have you heard from them lately? Most of us have.

So what does Fred need to know in order to hold this group together? How can he sort out what is happening here? How can he foster a spirit of unity, despite this diversity?

He might begin by reading the book in your hands. It will show him "what's going on beneath what's going on" in his committee. And the committee should read it, too. It will help them see where others in the room are "coming from." And in the process they will each individually learn to understand their own motivations at a deeper level.

We're Not All Wired Alike

To put it mildly, the Harmony Heights search committee faces a serious impasse. But apart from Steve's openness to a woman in the pulpit, their differences have little to do with what we typically think of as doctrine. They are simply at odds over issues of style, methods, and priorities. They don't see eye to eye on how to "do church."

In one sense this is nothing new. The church has arbitrated divergent views ever since the day of Pentecost. Still, the problem is particularly acute as we enter the twenty-first century.

Unless every long-range forecast is wrong, diversity will not diminish in the years ahead. It will only increase.

Urbanization and technology have served up an unprecedented range of personal options, leading to highly individualized lifestyles. Diversity reigns supreme, from our choice of foods in the dairy case to our choice of jobs in the marketplace to our choice of entertainment on weekends. With personal tastes so varied, is it any wonder that we disagree on the way to "do church"?

Recurring Mistakes

Nor does the future promise relief. Unless every long-range forecast is wrong, diversity will not diminish in the years ahead. It will only increase. Relentless centrifugal forces have been let loose in our society, and the church will continue to feel the strain.

Yet churches continue to make three recurring mistakes.

- First, they often downplay their own vulnerability to conflict, rarely taking the threat seriously. Even when strife erupts in nearby

congregations, leadership goes about life as usual, naively confident that “nothing like that would every happen here.”

- Second, because of that naiveté, churches pay little attention to conflict avoidance. In both long-range and short-range planning they lack a cogent method, consistently pursued, of anticipating and minimizing the risk of dissension.
- Third, when conflict does occur, churches tend to explain it in simplistic terms. Efforts to fix the problem center on a single cause (or at most a handful of causes), as though that fully accounted for the stress. They rarely get to the root of the matter. A more realistic appraisal would view congregational struggles as inherently complex.

Not only that, simplistic explanations of conflict usually obscure the deeper issues involved. In time, therefore, solutions derived from simplistic analysis tend to come undone.

That’s why we’ve structured this book to take you “below the surface” of congregational tension, to the very source of differences over styles and preference. We also show you how to make diversity your ally, not your adversary in the life of the church.

Roots of Diversity

We base our approach on a fundamental premise. We believe that diversity is rooted in the very nature of creation. Diversity, you might say, is “wired” into us. God created us that way. And since His gifts are always good, we need to see diversity as a blessing, not a curse.

Yet, looking at diversity this way requires us to battle a deep-seated, almost instinctive response. When people think differently from us, our first reaction is to see them as either uninformed, unintelligent, malicious, or unstable. Or if we are given to more pointed statements, we might label them ignorant, stupid, wicked, or insane.

That’s what is happening right now in the Harmony Heights search committee. They are looking at each other as if to ask, “Are you crazy? How could anyone in his right mind think that way?” They don’t realize that many of their pronounced differences result from the way they are “wired” inside.

If that idea is new to Fred and his committee, it’s equally new to most of us. Until recently there was little hard data to suggest that diverse thinking patterns come from differences in personal “wiring.”

But today new technology permits us to peer inside the brain and watch its actual firings. And what emerges from those observations is a picture of built-in, innate diversity.

Even the age-old conventional wisdom about men and women has been confirmed. They really do think differently. The male and female brains have significantly different circuitry, a distinction that develops in the womb. Among other things, women are better wired for intuition, men for spatial discrimination.¹

Then there are those differences that transcend gender. Some of us are right brain dominant, some left brain dominant. Some of us are visual learners, others aural learners. Some of us process ideas by imagining pictures, others by carrying on an internal dialogue, and still others by checking and rechecking our feelings.

No one has summed up the scope of these variations more succinctly than Robert Fulghum, when he writes:

The single most powerful statement to come out of brain research in the last twenty-five years is this: We are as different from one another on the inside of our heads as we appear to be different from one another on the outside of our heads. Look around and see the infinite variety of human heads — skin, hair, age, ethnic characteristics, size, color, and shape. And know that on the inside such differences are even greater — what we know, how we learn, how we process information, what we remember and forget, our strategies for functioning and coping.²

When congregations fail to manage tension properly, they easily end up at war with themselves. Parties draw swords, then slip into an “us-versus-them” mentality.

As a rule both sides attribute the conflict to differences in spirituality, maturity, knowledge, or reasonableness. (Of course, each party considers itself the paragon of these virtues.) Overlooked is the possibility that they differ simply because their minds do not work alike.

And the reason they do not work alike is that God designed us that way. It seems safe to presume, therefore, that He intended diverse viewpoints to be constructive, not destructive, a source of strength, not division.

¹ For a detailed examination of this subject, see Anne Moir and David Jessel, *Brain Sex: The Real Difference between Men and Women* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1991)

² Robert Fulghum, *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down on It*, (New York: Ivy Books, 1989), p. 40.

And why these differences inside? Because God Himself created us that way. He did not genetically program us to think alike. He must therefore see diversity as something good, something worthwhile and desirable. That, in turn, compels us to celebrate diversity as a divine gift.

But to applaud diversity is one thing. Understanding it and knowing how to work with it is quite another. And because we've not understood the true nature of diversity, we've sometimes dealt with it unwisely. We've allowed it to become a source of needless conflict. Confronted with an impasse like the one at Harmony Heights Church, we've been frustrated, unsure what to do.

Our goal in this volume is to move beyond the frustration. We offer a new frame of reference for understanding diversity and coping with it. We show you the true origins of diversity, deep in the human psyche. And we lay out a model of human behavior that explains "what's going on beneath what's going on" at Harmony Heights — and in your church, too.

A Model for Understanding Diversity

Our model for mapping diversity is not original with us. We've adapted it from the seminal work of the late Clare Graves, professor of developmental psychology at New York's Union College. He was fascinated by the variety of outlooks and values that prevail across the globe. He wanted to know how these differences emerge and how they ensconce themselves as fixtures in the mind.

In 1974, after a quarter-century of research, he published a sketch of his findings in *The Futurist* magazine. There he identified eight "value systems" that co-exist in our midst and vie with each other for influence.³

To say that diversity is rooted in God's created order does not mean that we differ too much to agree on foundational principles, for we can. Our thinking patterns, while not identical, share considerable overlap.

There is enough commonality, for instance, to permit unity on essentials of the faith (whether unity now exists or not). But there is not enough overlap to assure absolute agreement on how to implement these essentials and prioritize them. And it is here, in matters outside the gospel core, that Christians often find themselves at odds.

³ Clare W. Graves, "Human Nature Prepares for a Momentous Leap," *The Futurist* (April 1974), pp. 72-87.

These are not value systems in the sense of “the Christian value system” or “the democratic value system.” Rather, they are structured approaches to life, each one elevating particular human values such as survival, power, truth, or personal freedom.

Viewed from another angle, the systems are eight different ways of thinking about our place in the world. They are “thinking systems” (the name we use in this book) as much as they are “value systems,” the term Graves preferred.

By the time we reach adulthood, several thinking systems are part of our makeup. They run concurrently within us, like layers of consciousness, all competing for a voice in personal decisions and actions.

But, one system will have the dominant voice. This “dominant system” will influence our attitudes and behavior more than all the others. We will turn to its “rules” almost instinctively under duress or psychological pressure.

How we choose our dominant system is the subject for a later chapter. For now it’s merely important to note that dominant systems differ from person to person, even within the same family. Which brings us to the source of conflict over preferences and styles.

When any organization embraces people with a wide range of dominant systems, the kind of stylistic tension we see at Harmony Heights inevitably follows. Why? Because each system brings with it a distinctive way in which we

- define our sense of self
- organize our lives
- group our priorities
- structure relationships

The people we call “misfits” are often those whose dominant system simply does not coincide with the primary systems of their group.

If the difference is not pronounced, we may label them merely as “odd” or “a bit strange.” At more significant levels of difference we resort to words like “maverick,” “troublemaker,” or “dissident.” Ultimately the names “traitor,” “turncoat,” and “heretic” come into play.

Rules for Conduct

Within each system is a unique view of the world, from which the system’s core values emerge. This worldview also gives rise to specific rules for personal and group conduct.

- analyze ideas
- and respond to innovation and new initiatives

Patterns of motivation also change, along with our personal approach to leadership, the way we want to be managed, and how we learn. And the magnitude of this change is anything but minor.

Every member of the Harmony Heights search committee is governed by a different dominant system. That's why their perspectives and priorities are so far apart. They don't see eye to eye because there is no prevailing dominant system within the group. Four significantly different outlooks are locked in debate.

What we do in this book is to take you inside those outlooks — as well as others not represented on the committee — to understand their unique view of life. We show you how people become settled on a particular dominant system and how that system then shapes their values, conduct, and expectations.

But more importantly, we show you how to navigate through the maze of competing viewpoints when multiple systems contend for influence in your church. Our approach is called “systems-sensitive leadership.” It draws on a thorough understanding of the eight thinking systems and how they interact.

Systems-sensitive leadership allows you to maintain congregational harmony, even in the face of pronounced diversity. It makes you adept at effecting change without raising undue potential for conflict. And it helps you anticipate dissension and defuse it before strife secures a toehold.

Although history celebrates leaders who triumphed in crisis, the greater visionary is the one who averts crisis in the first place. We want you to be that type of leader.

To that end, we've divided this book into three sections. Part Two, the lengthy, practical section, shows you how to apply systems-sensitive leadership to worship, education, decision-making, preaching, communication, and ministry management. But before we turn to practical application, we use Part One to introduce you to the systems themselves.

Part One takes you through the thinking systems and their characteristic outlooks. But this introduction is purposefully streamlined to accommodate readers of a practical bent. We know that they will want to get to Part Two with a minimum of theory.

But simplifying the introduction forced us to omit vital information. Information you need if your goal is genuine expertise in systems-sensitive leadership.

To compensate for that omission, a section on advanced systems concepts (Part Three) concludes the book. It leads you through the subtleties and nuances of the systems and their interaction with one another. For those who want to go beyond a rudimentary knowledge of systems-sensitive leadership, Part Three is “must reading.”

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