

The Impact of Leadership Conflict on the Growth and Unity of Church Congregations: A Literature Review by Lewis A. Cosert, Daniel Goleman, Stephen P. Robbins, and Ralf Dahrendorf

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ABSTRACT

Leadership conflict is a frequent phenomenon within church organizations and has a significant impact on congregational growth and the unity of the body of Christ. This article analyzes the impact of such conflict by using the perspectives of four scholars: Stephen P. Robbins, through organizational behavior theory and conflict management; Daniel Goleman, through the concept of emotional intelligence in leadership; Lewis A. Coser, through the positive function of social conflict; and Ralf Dahrendorf, through authority-based conflict theory. Using a literature review approach and qualitative analysis, this article finds that poorly managed leadership conflict can lead to a decline in congregational growth, both numerically and spiritually, and can create division within church unity. However, when managed constructively through emotional intelligence and a functional approach, conflict can serve as a catalyst for renewal, stronger relationships, and increased congregational solidarity. The conclusions of this study confirm that leadership conflicts have a dual impact on the growth and unity of the church congregation, where Robbins and Dahrendorf's perspectives point to the inherent and structural nature of conflict, while Goleman and Coser offer practical constructive solutions. Church leaders need to develop high emotional intelligence, implement systematic conflict management, and view conflict as an opportunity for spiritual renewal. With a holistic approach that combines an awareness of power dynamics, emotion management, and negotiation skills, leadership conflicts can be transformed from a threat of division to a constructive force for the growth and unity of the congregation.

INTRODUCTION

The church is not only a spiritual institution but also a social organization that involves leadership structures, patterns of authority, interpersonal relationships, and collective decision-making processes. As a spiritual community, the church is expected to become a place where faith, love, service, and unity are nurtured. However, as a social organization, the church is also not free from internal dynamics, differences of opinion, competition for influence, and conflict. One of the most common forms of conflict that occurs within church life is leadership conflict, especially conflicts involving pastors, church boards, elders, ministry leaders, and members of the congregation.

Leadership conflict in the church may arise from various causes, such as differences in vision, unclear authority structures, poor communication, weak emotional maturity, disagreement over ministry programs, financial management issues, generational gaps, or dissatisfaction with decision-making processes (Afolabi, 2021; Graham III, 2020; Johnson, 2020). In many cases, conflict does not appear suddenly, but develops gradually from

unresolved tensions, hidden disappointment, and lack of open dialogue between leaders and congregation members (Bixby, 2016; Oppenshaw et al., 2018; Wilson, 2017). When these tensions are ignored, they may grow into open conflict that affects the stability of church life (Hare, 2019).

Several previous studies have examined the phenomenon of conflict within religious organizations. Coronado-Maldonado et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review on emotional intelligence, leadership, and work teams, finding that leaders with high emotional intelligence are more capable of managing interpersonal conflicts constructively, although their study focused on secular organizational contexts rather than church settings. Research by Smith (2021) on pastoral leadership in Protestant churches revealed that unresolved leadership conflicts often result in a 15-25% decline in weekly worship attendance within two years, as well as decreased member participation in ministry activities. Furthermore, a study by Handoyo & Kristanti (2022) on church conflicts in the Indonesian context found that leadership disputes frequently stem from generational differences in worship styles and decision-making preferences, yet their research did not comprehensively integrate classical conflict theories from sociologists such as Coser and Dahrendorf. While these studies provide valuable insights into the causes and consequences of church conflict, they tend to focus on either the psychological aspects of leadership or the practical outcomes, without offering a robust theoretical framework that combines organizational behavior, emotional intelligence, and sociological conflict theories simultaneously. This gap highlights the need for an integrative approach that draws from multiple disciplinary perspectives to understand and address leadership conflict in church congregations.

In the Indonesian church context, leadership conflict has become a serious issue in several congregations. Various cases show that disputes between pastors and church boards, between church assemblies and congregation members, or among leaders themselves can result in division, the departure of members, weakened ministry activities, and stagnation in church growth (Force III, 2025). Such conflicts do not only disturb the internal structure of the church but also influence the spiritual atmosphere of the congregation (Olulowo et al., 2025). Members may lose trust in their leaders, feel disappointed with the church, or even choose to move to another congregation (Huizinga, 2018; Packard & Ferguson, 2019). As a result, the church may experience a decline in worship attendance, participation in ministry, giving, and spiritual commitment.

Leadership conflict also has a significant impact on the unity of the congregation (Chambers, 2023; Mogita & Adegbile, 2026). The church is often described as the body of Christ, where every member has a role and is connected to one another in love and service. However, when leadership conflict is not managed properly, the congregation may become divided into groups that support different parties. This situation can create polarization, suspicion, gossip, and emotional wounds among members. Instead of becoming a community of reconciliation, the church may become a place of tension and competition. Therefore, leadership conflict is not merely an administrative problem, but also a spiritual and relational problem that affects the identity and mission of the church.

Nevertheless, conflict does not always have to be viewed negatively. If managed wisely, conflict can become an opportunity for renewal, evaluation, and organizational growth. Conflict can reveal hidden problems, clarify authority structures, improve communication

patterns, and encourage leaders to develop more transparent and participatory leadership. In this sense, conflict can function as a constructive force that helps the church become healthier, more mature, and more responsive to the needs of its congregation. The key issue is not whether conflict exists, but how church leaders understand, respond to, and manage the conflict.

This paper examines the impact of leadership conflict on two crucial aspects of church life: congregational growth and congregational unity. Congregational growth refers not only to numerical growth, such as increased attendance and membership, but also to spiritual growth, including faith maturity, commitment to service, and quality of relationships among members. Meanwhile, congregational unity refers to the ability of the church community to maintain togetherness, mutual trust, cooperation, and shared commitment despite differences and challenges.

To analyze this issue, this paper uses the perspectives of four classical and relevant thinkers: Stephen P. Robbins, Daniel Goleman, Lewis A. Coser, and Ralf Dahrendorf. Robbins' theory of organizational behavior and conflict management helps explain how conflict can be functional or dysfunctional depending on how it is handled. Goleman's concept of emotional intelligence provides insight into the importance of self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation in leadership. Coser's view of the positive function of social conflict shows that conflict can strengthen group identity and solidarity when managed constructively. Meanwhile, Dahrendorf's authority-based conflict theory helps explain how unequal authority relations within organizations can become a source of tension and structural change.

By combining these four perspectives, this paper seeks to provide a broader understanding of leadership conflict in the church. The discussion is expected to offer a theological-practical foundation for church leaders, pastors, and church assemblies in managing conflict wisely. Through constructive conflict management, emotional maturity, clear authority structures, and a commitment to reconciliation, the church can transform conflict from a destructive force into an opportunity for spiritual renewal, stronger leadership, and deeper congregational unity.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative research approach with a literature review method. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because this study aims to understand, interpret, and analyze the impact of leadership conflict on congregational growth and church unity based on theoretical perspectives. The focus of this study is not to measure the phenomenon statistically, but to examine the meaning, causes, forms, and consequences of leadership conflict within church organizations.

The research design used in this study is descriptive-analytical. Descriptive analysis is used to explain the phenomenon of leadership conflict in the church, while analytical interpretation is used to connect the phenomenon with the theoretical views of Stephen P. Robbins, Daniel Goleman, Lewis A. Coser, and Ralf Dahrendorf. Robbins' organizational conflict theory is used to analyze functional and dysfunctional conflict in church leadership. Goleman's emotional intelligence theory is used to examine the role of empathy, self-awareness, and emotional regulation in conflict management. Coser's theory is used to understand the positive function of social conflict, while Dahrendorf's authority-based

conflict theory is used to analyze conflict arising from unequal authority structures within organizations.

The data used in this study are secondary data obtained from books, journal articles, theoretical references, and relevant academic sources discussing organizational behavior, leadership, emotional intelligence, social conflict, authority, and church conflict. The main sources include the works of Robbins, Goleman, Coser, and Dahrendorf, supported by other relevant literature related to leadership and conflict management in organizational and church contexts.

Data collection was carried out through documentation techniques by identifying, selecting, reading, and reviewing literature relevant to the research topic. The collected data were then analyzed using qualitative content analysis. This analysis was conducted by categorizing the discussion into several main themes, namely leadership conflict, congregational growth, church unity, emotional intelligence, authority structure, and constructive conflict management. Each theme was interpreted based on the theoretical perspectives used in this study.

The validity of the analysis was strengthened through theoretical triangulation, namely by comparing and integrating several expert perspectives to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of leadership conflict in the church. Through this method, the study is expected to provide a theological-practical explanation of how leadership conflict affects congregational growth and unity, as well as how church leaders can manage conflict constructively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis Impact of Leadership Conflict

Impact to Growth Congregation

Conflict leadership that is not completed tend nature dysfunctional (Robbins), and causes decline growth congregation. Disappointed congregation often choose go out or move to church others, so that number Baptisms and worship attendance are declining. Ambiguous and unresponsive leadership transparent, as well as tend let conflict, of course will influence life people in a way overall. Leaders who have intelligence low emotional (Goleman) worsens situation Because lack of empathy to need spiritual congregation. Congregation Can happen division from in with No care from leader to current condition experienced in congregation. There will be a gap or groups that occur in congregation. This is ultimately destroying service and peace in congregation.

On the other hand, if leader apply Coser's perspective, conflict can be utilized as opportunity innovation services (eg. formation group small or recovery program), so precisely push growth qualitative and quantitative. Case studies in several Indonesian church shows that successful church change conflict become chance update experience improvement congregation up to 20–30% in two years post-reconciliation. The existence of.

Impact to Unity Congregation

Unity congregation as “body Christ” is very vulnerable to conflict leadership. According to Dahrendorf, the struggle for authority create polarization between group dominant and

subordinate, which leads to division and loss of a sense of togetherness. Protracted conflict damage trust and cause “hurt spiritual” collective.

However, with EI Goleman's approach, leader can facilitate full dialogue empathy, so that conflict become means reconciliation (Coser). The results are greater unity strong Because congregation feel heard and appreciated.

Finish conflict in congregation

Finish conflict in congregation church need a holistic approach, because conflict in the environment spiritual often involves issues of ego, theology, tradition, and deep emotions.

With combine Lewis Coser's thoughts (Sociology Conflict), Ralf Dahrendorf (Modern Conflict), and Daniel Goleman (Intelligence Emotional), we Can formulate a resolution strategy conflict comprehensive congregation from the structural level, psychological, to emotional.

a. Lewis Coser Approach (Function Positive Conflict)

Coser refused view that conflict always destructive. For him, internal conflict (within One group) instead Can strengthen solidarity group, complete tension that has been This boil, and confirm return identity or group norm boundaries. Conflict in congregation precisely give impact For each other pay attention and remind One with others; there is function control and existence room open precisely give impact for cheese in congregation. Implementation in the Congregation. Examples that can be We do: Don't Suppressing Conflict. Meaning, Assembly or Pastor Don't direct angry or silence moment There is difference opinion (for example question worship style, use of funds, or youth programs). Repressed conflicts will become a shattering explosion split congregation later.

Reframing Conflict (Change Your Perspective): tell the congregation, Differences opinion This is chance We For more each other understand vision together congregation. Focus on "Us" (In-Group) Because of conflict happening inside same congregation, take advantage of moment This For remind all party about identity they: "We may different question method, but We One in Christ and one objective that is glory God". Managed conflict with Good will make congregation more solid, and congregational rules (norms) become clearer.

b. Ralf Dahrendorf's Approach: Dissecting Conflict Power and Authority

Every organization (including church) has a "Structure Church organization and order" (those who rule / govern vs. those who are ruled/governed). Conflict appears No just because of a misunderstanding, but Because parties oppressed by the structure want to change distribution power. First, often conflict power in the church camouflaged with term spiritual. For example, the congregation against the Pastor's program No Because problem theology, but Because feel No involved in taking decision (structure too much authority centralistic). Dahrendorf push We to honestly admit that This is problem structure and power.

Both conflict question power That reasonable, dissatisfaction in service or to finance in congregation must have a channel official for distribute it. If not, there is channel official (such as synod, meeting transparent assembly, or hearing congregation), conflict will explode outside structure (for example in WhatsApp groups, gossip in the

parking lot, or make own worship group). The existence of a good Management Meeting Elements, Committee, meeting evaluation, even hearing congregation, of course give open space for congregation in convey aspirations or complaint to administrators.

Third, the solution No destroy the opposing party, but make compromises structural. For example, taking decision finance even the program in congregation No only involving Pastor, but also required through agreement inhabitant congregation in Hearing Congregation.

c. Daniel Goleman's Approach: Managing Emotional Heat

Change structure (Dahrendorf) and search solidarity (Coser) will total failure if manifested with anger. Goleman emphasizes Self-Regulation (control self) and Empathy (empathy) for prevent conflict damage personal relationships.

First, Lower Egoism Leader (Self-Awareness). Pastor or Chairman The assembly feels his authority challenged (perspective Dahrendorf) usually will react defensive and angry. Goleman requires leader for aware will his emotions alone.

Second, Validate Emotions Before Negotiating Structure. Before sitting down to discuss changes to the Articles of Association (Dahrendorf), leader must use empathy (Goleman). Empathy is very important in finish conflict so that There is award in the meeting. If emotions No validated moreover before, space negotiation structural will rejected raw.

Third, management intelligence social, managing dynamics meeting so as not to changed become event each other blame, but still focus on improvement system.

d. Stephen P Robbins' approach:

Different with spiritual approach that often sees conflict as a sin or failure spiritually, Robbins sees conflict as phenomenon natural that also occurs in environment the church that must managed with techniques managerial. The following is method finish conflict in the congregation use framework Stephen P. Robbins' work.

First, Changing Mindset (Viewpoint Interactionist). Not all conflict impact bad; this often-become view traditional in society. He adheres to the Interactionist View, which states that too many groups peaceful, harmonious, and rigid precisely will become stagnant, apathetic, and not creative. Implementation in congregation is Assembly must stop think that criticism or difference opinion (for example question method evangelism, use technology, or worship formats and even uplifting programs people young in congregation) is attack to leader.

Second, Task Leader Differentiate between Conflict Functional (constructive, focused on problems/programs, building church) and Conflict Dysfunctional (destructive, focused on attacking personal, breaking split congregation). Conflict functional must be maintained and managed, whereas conflict dysfunctional must be appeased.

Use Matrix 5 Styles of Solution Robbins Conflict

This is most famous contribution from Robbins (who was adopted from the Thomas-Kilmann model). Robbins states that method finish conflict depends on two dimensions: Cooperative (level of attention to interests other party) and Assertive (level attention to interests' self Alone).

1. Avoiding Style Assertive Low, Low Cooperative

Leader let conflict evaporate or interesting self from situation.

When to use in the congregation: When the problem is trivial, when emotion is at its peak so that need "cooling down", like when still in position angry peak left alone just Formerly, or when potential the damage bigger than benefit the solution.

Example: Debate small between two members alloy voice question position stand up. Let it be they finish alone, don't involve Assembly Church.

2. Accommodating, assertive style Low, High Cooperative

Leader gives up for fulfil desire party other, placing the interests of others above interest Alone.

When to use in the congregation: When the leader realize he was wrong, when problem This Far more important for party other, or as "investment" social " for build future relationships.

Example: A person pastor gives in to desires youth commission for stage concert spiritual, although pastor personal not enough Like the noise, because pastor know this is very important for youth growth. Giving room for youth to creative and engaging in service Far Better.

3. Highly Assertive, Cooperative, Competing Style Low

The strong party win, the weaker party lose. Rely on authority position.

When to use in the congregation: Only in situations emergency that requires action fast, enforce rule safety, or **against teachings clear heresy contradictory with Bible.

Example: A person from outside tries teach flow lost in fellowship. Pastor direct use his authority for stop activity and ask the person out. Nothing room for compromise question truth base faith.

4. Compromising Style: Moderately Assertive, Moderately Cooperative

Second party each other give and take something for reach point middle. There is no the winning party absolute or lost absolute.

When to use in the congregation: When both parties own the same power, when solution perfect No Possible obtained, and when time is very limited (eg. approaching Christmas). Principle justice and equality are very much needed, the main thing No sacrifice others.

Example: Conflict question budget. Group A asked for 50 million for renovation, group B asks for 50 million for mission. Due to limited funds, the Assembly decided to each get 25 million. No one was satisfied completely, but church Can Keep going walk.

5. Collaborating Style: Highly Assertive, Highly Cooperative

Work The same for find a satisfactory win-win solution interest second split parties. This is the most difficult but most effective style for conflict complex.

When is it used in the congregation? When the problem is very complicated, when second split the party has a very strong and legitimate interest, and when There is time for discuss deep.

Example: Conflict classic between traditional worship (people old) and contemporary worship (people young). Instead compromise (worship time is cut) so

each 1 hour makes both of them No satisfied), collaboration done with creating a blended worship format that pairs tool music traditional with modern, and agreed liturgy together so that second group feel appreciated and satisfied in a way full.

Stephen P. Robbins does not teach We method pray for the conflict lost. He taught we smart management. In church, Robbins' approach means that a leader spiritual must also have sharp Managerial Skills: he must know When must Avoiding, when must firm oppose error (Competing), when must giving in for the good of others (accommodating), when must look for road middle (Compromising), and when must Work extra hard for find solutions that meet need all parties (Collaborating).

CONCLUSION

Conflict leadership own impact double to growth and unity congregation church. Robbins and Dahrendorf's perspective show characteristic inherent and structural conflict, while Goleman and Coser offer solution constructive practice. Leader church need develop intelligence emotional high, apply management systematic conflict, as well as look at conflict as opportunity update spiritual. Based on these conclusions, several suggestions were put forward for church leaders, church assemblies, and subsequent researchers. For church leaders, it is recommended to develop emotional intelligence (self-awareness, empathy, and self-regulation), adopt a collaborative conflict resolution style that seeks win-win solutions, create open and transparent communication channels, and provide regular training on conflict management for all church administrators. For church assemblies and synod institutions, it is advisable to establish clear and fair conflict resolution mechanisms, including formal grievance channels, mediation procedures, periodic evaluations of the distribution of authority, as well as explicit provisions in the articles of association on the establishment of independent mediation teams or the involvement of external facilitators. For the next researcher, it is recommended to conduct empirical case studies on church congregations in Indonesia that have successfully transformed leadership conflict into constructive growth, develop instruments for measuring emotional intelligence and conflict management competencies tailored to the context of church leadership, and conduct longitudinal studies on the long-term impact of conflict resolution interventions on congregational growth and unity.

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