

**“EVERYONE RAISE YOUR HANDS  
(BUT DO IT SOMEWHERE ELSE)”**

**OR**

**“EVERYONE CLAP YOUR HANDS  
(BUT LET ME STICK MY FINGERS IN  
MY EARS)”**

**By**

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Understanding Conflict

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**[CONFIDENTIAL]**

## I. Introduction

“You’ll not oppress me brother!” These words spewed from the mouth of Cameron Pulley<sup>1</sup> and shook the church like thunder. As tense and volatile as the meeting was, the congregation was dumbstruck by the outburst. This kind of display, even from someone as powerfully outspoken as Cameron, was unheard of in a church meeting, and it was certainly unprecedented for a member of the church to say such things to the presiding Elder. Members of the church on both sides of the issue under discussion seemed equally dismayed.

When Cameron Pulley stood and uttered those words it signaled the beginning of the end of a bitter dispute, which had splintered a vibrant and growing church. The dispute would soon be “over,” but its conclusion would result in an exodus of many of the members of the church and irreparable injury to the fabric of the church and to the hearts and minds of many of those involved. I remember that night very well. I was a member of the New River Church of Christ and I was in attendance at the congregational meeting called to discuss and consider the conflict that had festered and eventually erupted into an acrimonious dispute that threatened to split the church. Such a meeting was unorthodox, in fact unprecedented, but so were the circumstances, which mandated it. I was sitting very near to Cameron when he suddenly rose from his seat in the back of the sanctuary, stepped into the aisle and began his vitriolic diatribe against Jeff Phillips, who was presiding over the meeting. Jeff was not only one of our three elders, he was also the minister of the church, and he was presiding over a meeting of the church in which worry, sadness, anger, fear, suspicion and other strong emotions held sway.

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<sup>1</sup> All names used in this paper have been changed for purposes of confidentiality and out of respect for those involved. Although the names are fictitious, the people, places and events, except for some “poetic license” and some imprecision due to faulty memory, are real.

In a way, Cameron was a microcosm of all those emotions and of the conflict itself. He was formerly a Church of Christ minister steeped in the Church of Christ's conservative doctrine and traditions, but now he was a businessman who had embraced a new found freedom in worship and practice. Much like our congregation with its diverse membership and the attendant divergent views towards worship, doctrine and church governance, Cameron had one foot in the old and one in the new. And his tirade was an emotional outburst driven, I now believe, by a war between his history and his perceived future in the church. Until Cameron's outburst, Jeff managed to maintain some semblance of control over the meeting and allowed various members of the church to give voice to the competing viewpoints in, for the most part, an orderly and respectful way. But the emotional undercurrent was strong and the tension palpable. So, it was really just a matter of time before the current swept us all away, and Cameron merely opened the floodgates. When the emotional waters receded, the debris field contained hurt, disappointed and disillusioned people and a landscape marked by two churches where once there was only one.

Neither the meeting I have briefly described, nor the interchange between Cameron Pulley and Jeff Phillips, was the pivotal event in the breakup of New River Church of Christ. These were merely some of the many events that took place during the life of a conflict that, to me, remains an enigma. It had a profound and lasting effect on me, my family and many other people close to me. I know that my views on my religious heritage, church, relationships and conflict itself were forever altered.

In this paper, I will finish telling the story I have begun, not just to understand this particular conflict better, but in an attempt to understand the nature of conflict better. The

paper will be divided into three additional sections. In Section II, I describe the conflict and provide the histories necessary to understand the conflict, identify its possible sources and make any analysis. In Section III, I will analyze the conflict in subpart A through the lens of personal introspection, in subparts B and C through the lens of conflict theory, and in subpart D through speculation on how I, or others involved, might have understood or handled it differently. I have chosen not to focus on the application to this conflict of particular techniques or strategies of conflict avoidance or resolution although I will refer to and utilize some works by recognized leaders in the field. Instead, I hope to identify principles of conflict theory using the New River Church of Christ conflict as the template, and in so doing gain insight into the nature and sources of conflict generally. In Section IV, I provide a conclusion that summarizes my reflections on the New River Church of Christ conflict.

## **II. Conflict Description**

The congregational meeting I have described took place in late Fall 1986. I will confess that I had to do some “digging” to put the chronology together. I first called one of my old friends at New River who thought, as I did, that the controversy took place “a little over 10 years ago.” When I found some letters and documentation about the events, I was shocked when I saw that it took place twenty years ago! I believe the conflict remains fresh and the wounds raw for many of us involved.

Cameron’s remarks were in response to a statement by Jeff Phillips that a request made by the elders to certain members of the congregation was not meant to oppress anyone. Some members were engaging in expressions of worship that were upsetting to other members of the church and the elders asked them to refrain from these activities

temporarily while the church continued to discuss the matter and work towards a solution. Cameron was not only one of those engaging in the objectionable expressions, he was the self-appointed spokesman for those he saw as being oppressed and stifled in their worship. Many events preceded and followed this meeting which, woven together, form the fabric of this conflict. I believe that it would be impossible to understand these events, or this conflict in a broader sense, without a brief history or overview of the Churches of Christ, a history of New River Church of Christ, and a chronology/description of the events. So, the reader's indulgence is requested in the following section.

#### **A. The Churches of Christ.**

Some researchers have traced the “roots” of the Churches of Christ to the Renaissance, the Reformation, the English Puritans, the Age of Reason, Martin Luther, the American Revolution and other events, movements and people.<sup>2</sup> While such connections may be debatable, it is easy to trace the birth of the Church of Christ movement to early nineteenth century America, particularly Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, northern Alabama, southern Ohio and southwest Pennsylvania.<sup>3</sup> Different movements led by ministers and leaders in the Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian churches emerged, apparently spawned by a commitment to political and religious freedom, disdain over perceived sectarianism and religious pluralism, and, most important, a desire to “restore” primitive Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Barton W. Stone was one of the early pioneers of this “Restoration Movement.” In 1803, he and some colleagues

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<sup>2</sup> C. Leonard Allen & Richard T. Hughes, *Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ* (ACU Press 1988).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 101.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

withdrew from the Presbyterian Synod of Kentucky to form their own Presbytery determined to become “Christians only” and restore the lifestyle and practices of the first Christian communities.<sup>5</sup> By 1811, the Stone movement had attracted some 13,000 adherents from various denominations.<sup>6</sup>

It is undisputable, however, that the most important single leader of the Restoration Movement was Alexander Campbell.<sup>7</sup> Alexander continued and expanded the work of his father, Thomas Campbell, who moved to Pennsylvania from Ireland in 1807. Alexander and the remainder of the family followed in 1809 and he quickly assumed leadership of the new movement.<sup>8</sup> The Campbells also had a Presbyterian heritage and, like Stone, believed that the restoration of primitive Christianity was the key to achieving Christian unity.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, Alexander focused on restoring the “essential” forms and structures of the primitive church, namely congregational autonomy, a plurality of elders in each congregation, weekly communion, and baptism by immersion for the remission of sins. Throughout the 1820’s and 1830’s Alexander Campbell wrote extensively in journals he edited, first *The Christian Baptist* and later, *The Millennial Harbinger*. His solution for achieving unity is clear in his writings: recover the common denominator of all Christians—the primitive Christianity reflected in the New Testament—and forsake the creeds and traditions of denominational Christianity.<sup>10</sup> I believe Alexander Campbell clearly was the “father” of the Church of Christ movement, and it is no wonder that members of the Church of Christ to this day

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 103.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 107.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 106.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

are sometimes referred to (often derogatorily) as “Campbellites.” Although his teachings form the basis of all Church of Christ doctrine, I believe he would grimace if he knew the extent to which his teachings have been carried and perverted. And like many other Christian movements, the Campbell movement finally faltered and even divided, resulting in two churches rather than one: the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Churches of Christ.<sup>11</sup>

As strange as it may sound to some, it was instrumental music, which led to this division. In 1858, the introduction of a melodeon into the worship service at a Kentucky church led to the use of instruments in many other congregations. This resulted in great consternation and dissension across the land and division into the instrumental music Christian Church and the non-instrumental music Church of Christ.<sup>12</sup> Other differences exist today between the two churches, but the significance of instrumental music (or lack thereof) cannot be overstated. Throughout my life (and to this day if asked what church I grew up in)<sup>13</sup> I would often hear in response to my admission of growing up in the Church of Christ something like, “Oh, you’re the ones who don’t believe in music.” The subject of instrumental music has been and remains, without question, the most divisive and seminal issue in the Church of Christ, and it would play a significant role in the conflict at the New River church. It is difficult for many people, including some in the Church of Christ, to understand why instrumental music is so important an issue.

Ironically, it is not so much instrumental music that is the issue as it is the fundamental

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<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> John D. Cox, *A Concise Account of Church History* (DeHoff Publications 1958).

<sup>13</sup> So that I am fair to the reader and this writing, and because the reader may wonder, I will point out that I left the Church of Christ several years ago. It is also important to point out that I am not completely objective or impartial in my views of the Church of Christ and, as a result, my analysis of the conflict described in this paper may be flawed to some degree.

doctrines on which the prohibition on the use of instruments is based, the extensions of the teachings which Alexander Campbell promulgated over a century ago. It was, I believe, these doctrines that created the emotions which Cameron Pulley manifested and which many other church members felt and acted on.

Since I believe there would have been no conflict and hence no dispute at New River absent these foundational doctrines and beliefs, I will list some of them:

- The only source of authority for the church is the New Testament. It is the only creed or book of religion that is needed.<sup>14</sup>
- The New Testament establishes a “pattern” to follow.<sup>15</sup>
- The church of the New Testament is exactly as the Lord would have it and He never intended that man should alter the divinely given pattern in any way.<sup>16</sup>
- The names by which the New Testament church is to be known have been designated by God in the divine pattern. Religious names given by men are wrong because there is no scriptural authority for them. The “churches of Christ” is one of the few scriptural names of the church. Denominational names aren’t found in the New Testament and should be considered “unscriptural names.”<sup>17</sup>
- The New Testament authorizes only five acts of worship:
  - Teaching the word of God
  - The Lord’s Supper (communion)
  - Congregational prayer
  - Giving
  - Praising God in song (strictly acappella)<sup>18</sup>
- Mechanical instruments of music are not to be found in the New Testament pattern of worship.<sup>19</sup>
- The organization of the church consisted simply of elders and deacons in each congregation with each congregation being completely autonomous. There is to be no central organization or synod.<sup>20</sup>
- The Restoration Movement was to restore the New Testament pattern in worshipping and serving God.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Cox, *supra* note 12 at 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 9. Mr. Cox refers to *Romans* 16:16 (New American Standard translation): “Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.” Mr. Cox makes no statement about the scriptural authority of the holy kiss which, in my experience, was never practiced.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 11. Mr. Cox states that, “The music of the church consisted only of singing.”

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 12.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 75.

- There is only one church and the church of Christ is not a denomination. Denominations came about as a result of a great falling away from the truth and the Restoration Movement was to restore the New Testament pattern upon the earth.<sup>22</sup>
- Baptism is essential for salvation and is by immersion for the remission of sins.

The essence of these doctrines is that there is a correct (scriptural) way to worship and believe and there is an incorrect (unscriptural) way to worship and believe. About ten years ago, for my own therapy, I coined a description of my religious heritage: “The doctrine of correctness.” In the strictest Church of Christ theology, one cannot be saved unless he or she is “correct” (in the correct church, practicing the correct doctrine, etc.). Accordingly, another common moniker given to the Churches of Christ is that they are “the only ones going to heaven.” Certainly, not all members of the Church of Christ adhere to this belief and, like many religious groups, there is a wide range of belief and practice among the different Church of Christ congregations. The wide disparity of views can be seen in three of the major universities with Church of Christ affiliations: David Lipscomb University (Nashville, Tennessee) Abilene Christian University (Abilene, Texas) and Pepperdine University (Malibu, California) which range from most conservative to most liberal as you travel from east to west. Overall, I believe the Churches of Christ are much less steeped in tradition than they were when I was growing up in the 1950’s and 1960’s. I still believe, however, that the undeniable, albeit unspoken, “bottom line” tenet of my religious heritage is that you get it right or you go to hell. The fundamental doctrines and beliefs of the Church of Christ was a heritage that the members of New River Church of Christ shared and it proved impossible for the

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<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 75, 76.

structure and practice that we all inherited to not play a major role in the conflict that erupted in 1986.

### **B. New River Church of Christ.**

New River was a melting pot Church of Christ folk. The members' attitudes, philosophies and goals were diverse. While some members were still somewhat steeped in conservative Church of Christ doctrine, others were moving away from strict beliefs and some even wanted to break free from the Church of Christ altogether. Despite this divergence, the membership roll was approaching 200 people and growing, and the members were accepting of and willing to show deference to one another. All kinds of new programs and initiatives were being launched and there was, overall, genuine excitement about the future. Personally, I was thrilled to be involved in a church where tradition did not rule the day and instead placed emphasis on acceptance rather than judgment.

My wife and I and our three children came to New River in 1983 with a group of about 20 other families. We had all left a very conservative Church of Christ in town after we stood up for a fellow member whom we thought had been wrongfully removed as a Deacon because he sometimes fellowshiped with "denominational churches." When we came to New River it was actually known as Harris Street Church of Christ. It had for many years been a church always in transition and racked with bitterness and strife. In 1983 it had no minister, no elders and the few remaining members were considering closing the doors. We came at an opportune time for us and them. It was literally a new beginning for all of us and the church began to flourish almost

immediately. After just a few months we all agreed to rename the church, appoint elders and hire a minister. It was truly a fresh start for all of us.

New River did, however, continue to be a jumping off point for many people who were disillusioned with the Church of Christ to varying degrees and needed a transition church as they made their way out of the Church of Christ. Harris Street had always had a revolving door of membership and New River did too, but to a much smaller and diminishing degree. Although people flocked to the church in groups, these groups, for the most part, found a home there and earnestly joined in our effort to make New River a different kind of Church of Christ. One such group arrived in the summer of 1986, many of whom were friends of mine. In fact, Ron, an orthopedic surgeon who was a friend and client of mine, came in with this group. He had always been a fascinating person to me because of his unabashed expressions of spirituality. As it turned out, Ron was also unabashed in his expressions of worship, as was most of the new group. I found their expressions refreshing, but, alas, some of the existing members found these expressions to be anything but.

### **C. Description of Events.**

In the Fall of 1986, several weeks after the arrival of Ron's group, many of them began to engage in spontaneous<sup>23</sup> expressions of worship, which were completely unknown and foreign to the people at New River. Bear in mind that before Ron's group, the corporate worship there consisted of acappella singing. There were no instruments of any kind, and the most expressive movements ever made would be the congregation

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<sup>23</sup> The expressions were not only spontaneous; they were without any prior "warning." This makes sense considering the specific expressions were spontaneous. I have learned, however, that the fact that none of the expressive worshippers communicated ahead of time that this was the way they worshipped and made no effort to obtain prior approval, or at least understanding, proved to be a conflict dynamic. I will discuss this further in Section III.

standing together during a song at the direction of the song leader. Any kind of individual expression was just not done, not because of specific edict, but because that was just the nature of the thing. Even an “Amen!” during the sermon was extremely rare.

The first thing I remember the new members doing was raising their hands during songs or prayer (yes, I peeked from time to time). Sometimes a person would raise one hand, sometimes both hands, and they would often close their eyes and sway from side to side. The hand-raising began with one or two people and spread to where you might see five or six people doing it at a time. It was not constant and it didn't happen on every song; it was more or less “as the Spirit moved.” I not only found the practice refreshing, I found it intriguing as well. Despite my background in the Church of Christ, I was blissfully ignorant of the conflict that was already in existence. I have learned that conflict can exist even if one side doesn't even know it exists,<sup>24</sup> and this was certainly the case at New River when the hand-raising began. The hand raisers were totally unaware, as were I and other people, that the hand-raising was causing some of the church members significant angst.

As the hand-raising continued and, as I perceived it, was becoming fairly common and expected during the congregational singing, spontaneous hand clapping began to occur by some of the hand raisers. They would sometimes clap when their hands were raised in the air. Other times they would just clap with the hands in a normal clapping position. Generally, the clapping was rhythmic, done to the cadence of the song being sung, but it also occurred as applause at the end of songs or after some good news was presented during the announcements at the end of the service.

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<sup>24</sup> Bernard Mayer, *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution: A Practitioner's Guide* (Jossey-Bass 2000), p. 5.

There were also some who were hand clappers but not hand raisers, and some of the members who were there before Ron's group started to join into the hand clapping and even the hand-raising. Also, it was not unusual to see someone stand-up all by himself or herself or step out into the aisle and kneel, especially during prayer (yes, I was still peeking). Suffice it to say, New River's worship services had taken on a whole new aura. Before Ron's group we had a congregation comprised of non-hand-raising, non-clapping, never kneeling standers only when asked and only as a group; we now had added to the mix hand raisers, hand clappers, hand raisers and clappers, standers, kneelers, other various combinations of these. Occasionally, a worshipper might even lie prostrate on the floor. It was at this point that the previously unknown conflict became a very real dispute. "A dispute is a conflict that has been acted upon, a product of the conflict,"<sup>25</sup> and some members of New River who were upset by the new expressions of worship took action.

Marsha Alice Vinson had, along with several other congregants, apparently been suffering in silence during the evolution of the new worship expressions. She could, however, suffer in silence no longer and she went to the elders of the church and complained that the hand-raising and clapping was upsetting her to the point that she and her family were about to leave the church. Giny Taylor, Marsha Alice's best friend at the time,<sup>26</sup> was one of the, up to this point, silent sufferers as well. It is to Giny that I owe the alternate title of this paper. She made complaint to the elders in writing which stated

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<sup>25</sup> See Leonard L. Riskin, James E. Westbrook, Chris Guthrie, Timothy J. Heinsz, Richard C. Reuben & Jennifer K. Robbennolt, *Dispute Resolution and Lawyers* (3d ed. 2005) pp. 2, 3.

<sup>26</sup> I say "at the time" because these two later became completely estranged when Giny and Marsha Alice's husband, Fred, began a relationship which resulted in his divorce from Marsha Alice, Giny's husband's suicide and the marriage of Fred and Giny. Obviously, this adds nothing to the subject of this paper and is included solely as juicy, scandalous filler.

that, “when the clapping starts I just want to stick my fingers in my ears.” More and more people expressed dissatisfaction and it became apparent that “we had a problem here at New River.”<sup>27</sup> Up till this point the elders thought, “tacit approval seemed to have been given by the congregation”<sup>28</sup> to the hand-raising and clapping. Now, it was obvious that that was not the case and the elders decided to intervene.

First, “a lengthy congregational discussion”<sup>29</sup> was conducted, after which it seemed that the whole matter would blow over. It became clear later, however, that many people had kept their feelings to themselves and did not accurately communicate the true level of their distress. Soon after the day of the meeting five families left the church and others began to be much more vocal in their objections to the hand-raising and clapping. Within a month after the initial meeting attendance dropped by more than 50 people and others were considering leaving the congregation. The elders then met with a number of the people who were practicing the hand-raising and clapping and requested that for a time they refrain from hand-raising and clapping during the assembly “for the sake of the body.”<sup>30</sup> This group initially consented to this request, but within a week or so they, along with several other members, asked to meet with the elders. During this meeting this group made known their desires to resume the practices they had been asked to refrain from. Their request was based on two grounds: 1) their practice was supported by Scripture,<sup>31</sup> and 2) they should have the freedom to lift hands and clap just as others had the freedom not to do so.

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<sup>27</sup> Open letter from the elders to the congregation given to the congregation on December 14, 1986. Copy on file with this writer. [hereinafter Open Letter].

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*

<sup>31</sup> I *Timothy* 2:8 (New American Standard Version) “Therefore, I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension.”

The elders were in a dilemma, which appeared to them to be a no-win situation. If they encouraged the continued practice of hand-raising and clapping, they would make one group very unhappy and to discourage it would make another group very unhappy. Compounding the dilemma was the fact that there was Scriptural mention of hand-raising, but there was also Scripture to support refraining from something that would offend your brother.<sup>32</sup> After much prayer and deliberation, the elders instituted a three step process to resolve the dispute: 1) they asked the church to engage in a dialogue whereby there would be conversations between those in favor of hand-raising and clapping and those who were against; 2) they mailed a questionnaire to the congregation asking all the members to share their feelings on these issues as well as others; 3) they then, based on the results of the dialogue and questionnaires, would respond with their instruction to the church.<sup>33</sup> In between steps two and three another congregational meeting was held, the meeting where Cameron Pulley declared his immunity from oppression.

On December 14, 1986 during the Sunday morning assembly, the elders gave their “instruction.” Jeff Phillips read a prepared statement as an open letter to the church and copies were passed out to all persons in attendance. I have read this letter again for the first time in 20 years in order to write this paper. With the benefit of hindsight, 20 years of maturing, and studies and practical experience in conflict and dispute resolution, I am convinced that there were issues at work other than just hand-raising and clapping

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<sup>32</sup> I *Corinthians* 10: 23, 24 (New American Standard Version): “All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.”; *Romans* 14: 2, 15, 21 (New American Standard Version): “One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do *anything* by which your brother stumbles.”

<sup>33</sup> This means their decision which, based on the governance structure of Churches of Christ, would be final.

and that, in fact, these were not the real issues requiring resolution. The letter gave several instructions, including the following:

- ...accept one another despite a difference of opinion and go on with the ministries which have been interrupted by our disagreements.
- ...search the Scriptures constantly, be willing to change when you find that your belief or position is not scriptural, and above all, to learn to accept one another despite differences of opinion!
- ...none of your elders feel that we should make a break with the churches of Christ. In fact, it is our opinion that we have spent far too much time criticizing the fellowship in which most of us have roots!
- That those of us who differ in opinion on these matters learn to accept one another and respect the other's opinion.
- While we encourage those who want to raise hands and clap in worship to continue to do so, we will ask you to refrain from doing it in this assembly, for the sake of your brothers and sisters...
- That we all seek to love one another and to move forward in the tremendous task which is ours to reach this world for Christ...<sup>34</sup>

Sadly, and despite the elders' earnest efforts to find a middle ground, or one that would respect both camps and remain "scriptural," many viewed the letter as an edict and a retreat from advances that had been made to escape the legalistic, judgmental and oppressive doctrines of the Churches of Christ. As a result, over 40 people left New River immediately and another 40 or so would soon follow. Most of these people banded together and formed a new church. Over time, between 30 and 40 more drifted away, basically disillusioned or burned out with church in general. This group included my family and me. Today, New River Church of Christ has grown back to about 150 members, only a handful of whom were there in 1986. Only one of the three original elders is still there and the revolving door of membership has returned as New River still endeavors to keep one foot in the old and one in the new.

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<sup>34</sup> Open Letter, *supra* note 27.

### **III. Conflict Analysis**

#### **A. Analysis Prologue (Things the Reader Should Know)**

##### **1. New River Update**

I feel comfortable saying the revolving door has returned. After I had chosen the New River conflict as my topic for this paper I ran into the New River church song leader, Ken Smithson, in a most unlikely place, but at a most opportune time. This was several weeks ago during one of my weekly sojourns to the Kansas City International Airport. I was at the airport to catch a return flight to Nashville, having attended my Understanding Conflicts class at the University of Missouri Law School in Columbia earlier that day. While preparing to get in the “A Line” for my Southwest Airlines flight (the 9:30 p.m. flight to Nashville has very few passengers so I am always an “A” which, for some strange reason, thrills me to no end) I found myself standing beside my old friend. Ken is younger than I am and he did not become a member at New River until years after the hand-raising episode. He was very familiar with it, however, and had told me on several occasions over the past few years that he was happy to see more expressive worship returning to New River since he took over as song leader. I met Ken when I returned to New River at his request several years ago to participate in a special song service, and we had been friends ever since.

Ken, other than the minister, was the most active and involved person at New River. He spent untold hours preparing the song services, teaching class and leading worship. I was shocked when he told me that he and his family had recently left New River and were not attending church anywhere. The story was all too familiar—dogmatic control being asserted over all of his initiatives because of fear and concern by some that

he was going to far, then discussion, debate and disillusionment. Ken also told me of the continual turn over in membership and it was he who actually used the term, “revolving door.”

Perhaps my summary of this encounter with Ken belongs in the background section above. I felt the need, however, to include it here as a segue to what I perceived as a necessary “prologue” to the analysis section. My meeting with Ken was more than ironic; it was disconcerting for some unknown reason. As strange as it may sound, I found myself feeling “nervous” after our discussion. As I began writing this paper the nervousness returned with some troubling latent emotions mixed in. I wrote as if I was compelled to take a journey I had never taken before, a journey through my own heritage. Despite my mental efforts to skip the journey, I could not help but march inexorably on. I knew I would include the Ken story in this paper, but I did not remember the nervousness until I sat down to write. As I put together an outline, I also knew that I would get to this part of the paper and have to give some explanation to help the reader better understand why this paper is structured as it is, and that I would have to explain a little more about me. I did not know, however, what the nervousness and anxiety was really about. And I did not know, until my wife pointed it out to me, that this paper is my catharsis.

## **2. My Background and Roles.**

My mother grew up in Mt. Olive, Mississippi, the daughter of a Methodist father and a Baptist mother. After marrying my father she became a member of the Church of Christ, which became a source of conflict, both for her individually and between her and

my father. Many times she told me of the Gospel Meeting<sup>35</sup> she attended with my father where the gist of the preacher's sermon was that all Baptists and Methodists were lost. Although my father grew up in the Church of Christ, this is not what he believed, but my mother never forgot that she had embraced a religion that said her parents were going to hell.

When I became a husband and father I was convinced that I could remain in the Church of Christ but discard all of the horrible baggage and keep only the good. I even had the grandiose idea that I could lead many bound up Church of Christ folks into "enlightenment" and that I could find a church which shared this ideal. It would be a church that would never succumb to the fear and judgment of our past and would instead "boldly go where no man has gone before."<sup>36</sup> As a result of this mindset, I recognize, in retrospect, that I had significant identity issues of my own connected to the New River conflict. I was convinced that New River was the church I was looking for. I led my family there, I insisted New River was different, I kept us there after the break-up and I had to acquiesce in allowing us to depart. Accordingly, I recognize that my view of my roles as husband and father has been impacted by the controversy, and that my and my family's views toward church and religion have been equally impacted. So, the cathartic exercise of writing this paper has made me suspect that my nervousness and anxiety comes from a two decade old identity crisis that I put on a shelf somewhere which I am now dusting off. I recognize now that an old and deep frustration attached to roles I feel I did not fulfill still lives. Walter Mischel and Aaron L. DeSmet have accurately described my conflict: "Among the most frustrating conflicts are those that people fight within their

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<sup>35</sup> This would be referred to as a "Revival" in most Protestant churches.

<sup>36</sup> *Star Trek* (CBS Studios, Inc. 1966)

own heads, as they struggle with the dilemmas and temptations they encounter and create.”<sup>37</sup> Roger Fisher and Daniel L. Shapiro suggest that a person’s role is one of five core concerns almost all people share and that one can use core concerns as a lens to see a situation more clearly and to diagnose it.<sup>38</sup> I do believe that my roles issue is a lens through which I am seeing this conflict. In this case, however, I believe it may obscure rather than bring clarity, and I want the reader to keep this in mind. The unresolved conflict within me is one of what I believe are several different conflicts which grew out of the New River controversy. I will endeavor to list the different conflicts and describe them briefly. And, although I will focus the analysis on what I will call the “central conflict,” I will consider my identity issues further. I will also endeavor to use the core concerns concept as an objective lens to view this conflict.

### **3. Parties in Conflict**

I believe that the question of identity was underneath all of the conflict at New River and that it drove much of the fear and anxiety I saw. As Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Shelia Heen have written, “Our anxiety results not just from having to face the other person, but from having to face *ourselves*...what we hope we are but fear we are not...having our identity threatened can be profoundly disturbing.”<sup>39</sup> To many members of the Church of Christ their identity is the basis for their security, not just in this world, but also for eternity. That is profound. In the case of New River of security was even more specific and complex. Two members of the congregation had their livelihoods at

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<sup>37</sup> Walter Mischel & Aaron L. DeSmet, *Self-Regulation in the Service of Conflict Resolution*, in Morton Deutsch & Peter Coleman, *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution Theory & Practice*, p. 256 (Jossey-Bass 2000).

<sup>38</sup> Roger Fisher & Daniel L. Shapiro, *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate*, pp. 15, 18 (Viking 2005).

<sup>39</sup> Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton & Shelia Heen, *Difficult Conversations: How to Address What Matters Most*, pp. 111, 112 (Penguin Books 1999).

stake in the conflict, or at least that was the perception. One of the members worked for a university affiliated with the Churches of Christ and another worked for a counseling service affiliated with the Churches of Christ. There was a very real concern that they would lose their jobs if New River allowed hand-raising, etc.

**a. The “Hands” and the “Hands-Not.”**

New River Church of Christ was essentially divided between those who were for a worship style that allowed, among other things, hand-raising, clapping, and those who were against it. This didn't mean that everyone on the hands side actually participated in it, but that, for various reasons, they supported it. Basically, everyone at New River was in one camp or the other, and this was, in a nutshell, the controversy. It was not, however, the issue; not in my view. I believe the real source of conflict lay elsewhere and that it was never addressed. These two groups are the focus of my conflict analysis that will expand on the identity issue already touched on.

**b. The Elders**

The conflict dynamics involving the elders could be a study all by itself. In my view, they were in conflict with the “hands,” the “hands-not,” various individuals in the church, the church as a whole and with themselves. I believe it is important to be aware of these dynamics, but we will save the analysis for another day.

**c. People Like Me**

I was, to some degree, in conflict with both groups, certain individuals, the elders, and myself. I am sure there were many people like me and that some of them had conflict within their own family as well. Several of us floated between both camps to some degree. I was a non-hand-raiser who supported the hands and I know that there

were people in each camp who identified me with the other. I did try to “mediate” in a way between the two, although I had no clue how to mediate at the time and the results showed. The point is that there were conflicts on an individual level throughout the church.

#### **4. Questionnaires**

As I was writing this paper and I began to struggle with my own emotions as I have described, I began to question both my recollection and my perspective. I called some people who were involved in the conflict at New River and I was immediately struck by how vivid their memories were, although some of them were as foggy on the date as I was. After thinking about these conversations I decided to write a questionnaire. It was not meant to be scientific, but was a “check” on my view of the conflict, both then and now. I did borrow ideas from a worksheet known as “The ‘Beyond Reason’ Preparation Guide”<sup>40</sup> and the writings of Bernard Mayer<sup>41</sup> to help me frame some of the 26 questions. I sent out 10 questionnaires and I was gratified by the willingness of the people to respond and the work they put into it; and I received the validation I was looking for. Four people called me and gave me their answers by telephone and six completed the questionnaire in writing.<sup>42</sup>

#### **5. Conflict vs. Dispute**

I have already alluded to the distinction between a conflict and a dispute. Until recently I shared the tendency of most people to use the words “conflict” and “dispute”

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<sup>40</sup> ©2006 by Roger Fisher, Daniel L. Shapiro, Ph.D, & Zoe Segal-Reichlin. Based on the ideas of *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate* (Viking, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> Mayer, *supra* note 24.

<sup>42</sup> The completed questionnaires are on file with the writer.

interchangeably.<sup>43</sup> It has helped me, however, to recently learn that it is helpful to have a more precise understanding of the two. “Conflict may be defined simply as a clash of interests or aspirations, actual or perceived. Disputes are immediate manifestations of conflict, and arise when people take actions based on this actual or perceived clash.”<sup>44</sup> This concept resonates loudly to me in terms of the New River hand-raising episode. One of the respondents to my questionnaire put it succinctly with his opinion of what caused the competing interests to engage: “Someone complained.”

But if a dispute is a concrete manifestation of the underlying conflict,<sup>45</sup> what happens if you focus only on the dispute and not the underlying problem? Marsha Alice Vinson took action in going to the elders and the hand-raising conflict became a dispute. The elders then took action, which changed the face of the dispute and led to more actions by other people, like Cameron Pulley. All 10 respondents to my questionnaire said nothing could have been done to prevent what happened. I wonder. Interestingly, all 10 also replied in the negative to my question, “Do you believe the real issue was addressed by those involved?” With this response I agree. And since the real conflict wasn’t addressed (the real underlying problem), there probably was no way to prevent the actual outcome. It is easy for me to see this with the benefit of 20 years of hindsight. The lesson for the future is to not get so caught up in the battle lines that have been drawn that I overlook, and fail to deal with, the actual source of the battle. I believe disputes end one way or another, but the conflicts that caused them may not.

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<sup>43</sup> Riskin et al., *supra* note 25 at 4, n. 1.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.* at 2, 3.

<sup>45</sup> *Id.* at 5.

## **B. Nature of the Conflict**

There is no grand theory of conflict.<sup>46</sup> There are many theories, however, and, therefore, many ways to analyze the New River conflict. After considering several different theories and/or approaches to conflict analysis, I determined that some of the work of Bernard Mayer<sup>47</sup> was the most helpful in analyzing the New River conflict. Accordingly, I will use it as the primary resource for my analysis. “How we view conflict will largely determine our attitude and approach to dealing with it...If we are to be effective in handling conflict, we must start with an understanding of its nature.”<sup>48</sup> I believe the same holds true in analyzing conflict. So, how does the New River conflict help us understand the nature of conflict and vice versa?

Mayer postulates that conflict occurs along cognitive (perception), emotional (feeling), and behavioral (action) dimensions.<sup>49</sup> All three of these stand out to me as I look back at the New River ordeal.

### **1. Perception**

“As a set of perceptions, conflict is a belief or understanding that one’s own needs, interests, wants, or values are incompatible with someone else’s.”<sup>50</sup> It is abundantly clear that conflict was in existence shortly after the first hand went up. That action told several members, including Marsha Alice Vinson, that their needs, interests, wants and values were at risk. The “hands-not” had a need, interest, want and value in: remaining traditional in worship and doctrine, maintaining their comfort level, not being

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<sup>46</sup> Leonard Riskin, power point presentation, Understanding Conflict Class, University of Missouri Law School, August 21, 2006.

<sup>47</sup> Mayer, *supra* note 24.

<sup>48</sup> Mayer, *supra* note 24 at 3.

<sup>49</sup> *Id* at 4.

<sup>50</sup> *Id.*

fearful, remaining a “Church of Christ” church, feeling secure, not being known as radical, etc... To the “hands-not,” the raising of hands threatened all of these things and actually, the perception was true: these things were incompatible with the needs, interests, wants and values of the “hands.”

## **2. Feelings**

“Conflict also involves an emotional reaction to a situation or interaction that signals disagreement or some kind.”<sup>51</sup> My questionnaire respondents listed numerous emotions they thought were at play including: sadness, anger, disappointment, frustration, hatred, love, disgust, and fear. I agree with all of these, and I also agree, as was pointed out more than once, that fear was a critical emotion. I believe that fear was the initial emotion felt and the one that “signaled” the disagreement. The other emotions followed as the conflict played out. One of my respondents went so far as to identify the specific fear involved: “the fear of losing your salvation.” As strange as this may sound to some, I also agree with this assessment and I will mention it further below.

## **3. Action**

“Conflict also consists of the actions that we take to express our feelings, articulate our perceptions, and get our needs met in a way that has the potential for interfering with someone’s else’s ability to get his or her needs met.”<sup>52</sup> The action of raising hands at New River was exactly what is described in the above sentence. The “hands” were expressing their feelings (feeling of being free and uninhibited), articulating their perceptions (that this was the right place to express themselves this way), and attempting to get their needs met (the need to worship in this way, feel free to

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<sup>51</sup> *Id.* at 5.

<sup>52</sup> *Id.*

do so and be embraced and accepted). Well, this definitely had the potential to interfere with the “hands-not’s” needs because the two sets of needs were antithetic.

### **C. Cause of Conflict**

“At the center of all conflicts are human needs...people engage in conflict because of their needs, and conflict cannot be transformed or settled unless these needs are addressed in some way.”<sup>53</sup> These words by Bernard Mayer ring true, especially in terms of the New River conflict. The competing needs were never addressed by the elders or by the competing parties. There was a myopic focus on the dispute, driven by a fervent desire to preserve the church. Ironically, the “institution’s” need to perpetuate itself caused the needs of the people who made up the institution to be ignored and unattended. I appreciate Mayer’s choice of words because he does not say that needs have to met in order to transform or settle conflict, but that they be “addressed in some way.” In order to “save” the church, the elders told the “hands” that their need for expressive and meaningful worship was a source of dissension that threatened the peace and unity of the congregation. Accordingly, the clear message was that that these members should suppress rather than express what to them was a critical need.

Mayer suggests that needs do not exist in isolation or independently of other forces, but are intricately tied to the other things, which are roots of conflict.<sup>54</sup> He has designed a “Wheel of Conflict” which has needs as its hub and five basic sources of conflict as outer spokes: communication, emotions, values, structure, and history.<sup>55</sup> I will look briefly at each of these forces, how they are intertwined and how they may have influenced the conflict at New River.

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<sup>53</sup> *Id.* at 8.

<sup>54</sup> *Id.*

<sup>55</sup> *Id.* at 9.

## 1. Communication

“Humans are very imperfect communicators.”<sup>56</sup> Consider these responses by some of the questionnaire respondents: “I believe people heard with emotions affecting their hearing and understanding;” “Emotions fueled by feelings of fear and/or oppression greatly interfered with any constructive process;” “The feelings and emotions were strong, therefore, communication was lacking as most of us thought we were right and didn’t want to hear the other side;” “If members who wanted to raise hands and/or clap had communicated this before actually participating in these activities, it could have created less controversy;” “ I recall seeing in writing in a public church document a list of names of people for and against these freedoms along with the encouragement to communicate. I believe this public stating of sides probably strengthened the positions of these people and created a more adversarial feel making it less likely that either side would receive influence from the other. I also do not believe this communication occurred at a significant level.” These statements speak for themselves—there was a vicious cycle involving emotion, bad judgment and lack of communication.

## 2. Emotions

“Emotions are the energy that fuel conflict.”<sup>57</sup> I have no doubt that this was the case at New River, and I have already touched on some of these emotions. There was one emotion, however, that drove this conflict all by itself. It was the emotion of fear and it was tied directly to the needs of both parties and influenced by the history of the parties. Fear was listed by almost all of the questionnaire respondents as a key emotion at play in the conflict and I am convinced that it made up part of the “real issue” which

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<sup>56</sup> *Id.*

<sup>57</sup> *Id.* at 10.

was never recognized or addressed. On the side of the hands there was a fear of regression, of falling back into and being dominated by traditional Church of Christ doctrine and practice that they were passionately striving to break free from. The fear felt by the hands not is harder to understand, especially for people who have no history with the Church of Christ. Hopefully, the history included in this paper offers some insight. And again, the questionnaire respondents provide great insight. I have already mentioned that one respondent specifically described the fear at play as the “fear of losing your salvation.” Another respondent said it was the fear of what hand-raising and clapping “would ultimately lead to.” I remember this concern being raised over and over again by many of the hands-not. These two fears are part of the same continuum or line of progression: hand-raising and clapping will lead to even more expressive forms of worship which will lead to instrumental music which will lead to the church leaving the Church of Christ which will mean we are unscriptural and in error which means my salvation could be lost. As extreme as it may seem, the raising of hands at New River Church of Christ threatened the eternal security of many members of the church. Mayer has identified security as one of the “survival needs.”<sup>58</sup> In the context of the New River conflict, it is hard imagine anything more important or profound to many of those involved.

In considering the emotions “spoke” of in Mayer’s “wheel,” the work of Fisher and Shapiro is enlightening.<sup>59</sup> They postulate that in negotiations it is critical for the participants to address the concern, not the emotion.<sup>60</sup> “Rather than getting caught up in every emotion that you and others are feeling, turn your attention to what generates these

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<sup>58</sup> *Id.* at 17.

<sup>59</sup> See Fisher & Shapiro, *supra* note 38.

<sup>60</sup> *Id.* at 15.

emotions.”<sup>61</sup> Fisher and Shapiro suggest that it is human wants that generate these emotions, which is consistent with Mayer’s theory that human needs are the reason people engage in conflict. These human wants are described by Fisher and Shapiro as five *core concerns* “that are important to almost everyone in virtually every negotiation.”<sup>62</sup> These core concerns are *appreciation, affiliation, autonomy, status, and role*.<sup>63</sup> In terms of the New River conflict, there was little, if any, attention given to these types of concerns or needs. Instead, there was an almost obsessive focus on the emotions of the parties. As a result, the focus was on the symptoms of the conflict rather than the causes.

As discussed previously, the core concerns can be used as a lens to review the emotional dimension of a negotiation.<sup>64</sup> Fisher and Shapiro have created tables that illustrate the core concerns,<sup>65</sup> the risks of ignoring the core concerns<sup>66</sup> and the power of meeting core concerns.<sup>67</sup> These tables help form a lens through which the New River conflict can be viewed. I will look at one or both of the parties to the central dispute in terms of each core concern and make “argument” based on Fisher and Shapiro’s tables.

**Appreciation.** The actions of the “hands” in worship were not acknowledged as having merit, but were instead devalued. The “hands” were, therefore, unappreciated. This made them feel angry and resentful which resulted in them being uncooperative and negative in their reactions. Had they been appreciated they would have felt compassion and contentment resulting in a desire to cooperate.

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<sup>61</sup> *Id.*

<sup>62</sup> *Id.*

<sup>63</sup> *Id.*

<sup>64</sup> *Id.*

<sup>65</sup> *Id.* at 17.

<sup>66</sup> *Id.* at 18.

<sup>67</sup> *Id.*

**Affiliation.** The “hands” were treated as adversaries or outsiders. This made them feel sad but also annoyed and impatient. This resulted in them wanting “to go it alone.” Likewise, they treated the “hands-not” as adversaries, which generated the same emotions and reaction. Had the parties treated one another as colleagues, they would have felt commonalities with one another as well as hope and pride. These positive emotions would have resulted in a desire to work together and overcome obstacles.

**Autonomy.** The “hands” definitely felt their freedom to make decisions was impinged upon. This made them feel indignant as Cameron Pulley demonstrated during the congregational meeting. This resulted in rigid thinking. The “hands-not” must have felt likewise because their thinking was equally rigid as there was no consideration given to compromise. Had the parties’ concerns for autonomy been met, they would have felt relaxed, comfortable and secure, which would have resulted in creativity and resourcefulness.

**Status.** Both parties’ relative standing was treated as inferior by the other. The “hands” were treated as odd, extremists and troublemakers. The “hands-not” were treated as ultra-conservative, close-minded and unspiritual. The treatment by each party toward the other resulted in the same negative emotions being felt by each party. These emotions included embarrassment, anger and contempt, which resulted in each side seeing the other as untrustworthy and deceptive. Had the parties given full recognition to each other’s status they would have felt proud, accomplished and caring. This would have resulted in each side viewing the other as trustworthy and worthy of respect.

**Role.** This concern is the most difficult to recognize in the New River conflict. It seemed, however, that in terms of the “hands-not” that they could have seen their role as

trivialized and less important than before since they were being described as obstructionists and un-spiritual. Similarly, the “hands” could have seen their role as being more restrictive than before because they were asked not to participate as fully and as expressively as they wanted to. As a result of their respective roles now being less fulfilling, each side would have felt apathy, sadness and hopelessness. This would have exacerbated the negative inclinations and reactions already described.

### **3. Values**

“Values are the beliefs we have about what is important, what distinguishes right from wrong and good from evil, and what principles should govern how we lead our lives.”<sup>68</sup> Based on this description, it is clear that conflicting values at play at New River and significantly impacted the conflict. In terms of this analysis, however, I believe these values are embedded or discernable in the needs, emotions and history discussed herein and will, therefore, not be discussed separately.

### **4. Structure**

“The structure, the external framework, in which an interaction takes place or an issue develops is another source of conflict.”<sup>69</sup> I believe structure was a source of conflict at New River, but more precisely, it was an impediment in the resolution of the conflict. Consider these responses by the questionnaire respondents: “Church structure within Churches of Christ place decision-making in the hands of the elders;” “The elders were the decision makers;” “There was great uncertainty around how to handle this. No clear system of conflict resolution seemed to be in place.” Arguably, there has to be a final decision maker in every institution, including churches. I can’t help but believe,

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<sup>68</sup> Mayer, *supra* note 24 at 11.

<sup>69</sup> *Id.* at 12.

however, that the particular structure of Churches of Christ that New River followed kept the disputing parties from ever really talking or listening to one another. I also believe the elders found themselves in an impossible situation driven by their own inherent need to preserve the institution, which is in conflict with any desire they may have had to address the real needs of individual parties.

## **5. History**

“Conflict cannot be understood independently of its historical context.”<sup>70</sup> None of the words of Bernard Mayer resonated more loudly than his statements about the role of history as a source of conflict. It is abundantly clear that the historical roots that both sides of the conflict at New River shared had the driving force of a steamroller at New River, and every one of the questionnaire respondents identified it as such. It was part and parcel to the fear component I have already described. In writing this part of the paper, I found myself struggling for adjectives strong enough to describe the importance of history in this conflict. It is clear that there was more going on in the conflict at New River than merely whether the worshippers would be allowed to raise hands or clap. After having discussions and meetings with all involved, and after reviewing the questionnaires they generated, the elders made a point in their open letter to state their unanimity that New River would not be leaving the Churches of Christ. “The history of the people who are participants in a conflict, of the systems in which the conflict is occurring, and of the issues themselves has a powerful influence on the course of the conflict.”<sup>71</sup> Wow! What else can I say? Nothing, so I will let Mr. Mayer sum it up: “History provides the momentum for the development of conflict. Too often we try to

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<sup>70</sup> *Id.* at 13.

<sup>71</sup> *Id.*

understand a conflict in isolation from its historical roots and as a result are baffled by the stubbornness of the players.”<sup>72</sup>

#### **D. Speculation**

Based on what I have learned recently and am learning about conflict, might I have understood or handled the New River conflict differently or better? First, as to understanding it better I can answer in the affirmative. When I was embroiled in the controversy at New River, I had no concept about the nature of conflict, its sources, what drives it or inhibits its resolution. I don't think anyone involved did, including the elders. Having some basic knowledge of the nature of conflict would have given us a chance to recognize what was really going on, what needs were at play and what was driving the emotions and responses which so easily grabbed our focus. As it was, I believe the real issue was never recognized and, accordingly, was never dealt with. The phrase, “can't see the forest for the trees,” comes to mind. As to handling it better, I am less certain. It is easy to say I would handle something better with the benefit of hindsight and new knowledge. I have been in the middle of some frays, however, since participating in studies on understanding conflict and I performed abysmally. Still, I am inclined to believe that I, and the others involved, would have handled the New River conflict better today than we did. This assumes we have better knowledge and understanding of conflict. I believe better understanding would have to lead to better handling. Before the New River conflict, I had not been exposed in my church experience to the ways pent up emotions influence those in conflict and the dearth of real listening that results. “The two hardest (and most important) communication tasks in difficult conversations are

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<sup>72</sup> *Id.*

expressing feelings and listening.”<sup>73</sup> I have now had exposure to knowledge and disciplines that have made me think, as I never have before about these things, especially about stopping to really listen. It is such a simple concept, but it is horribly neglected as a discipline. If people have a better understanding of conflict and what conflict really is, they will have a better opportunity to transform it or resolve it. Listening is one of the keys to transforming or resolving conflict, and it is a natural by-product of understanding what conflict is really about. In situations like the New River conflict, however, the people involved not only stop listening to one another, they don’t even realize that they’ve stopped. I appreciate this suggestion: “While you are listening to someone...try to really pay attention. To do that you may have to notice when you are not listening...”<sup>74</sup> Had this concept been understood and practiced in the New River conflict, a recognition and appreciation of the competing needs might have occurred. As a result, the “wheel of conflict” might have “rolled” to a different and better conclusion.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

My examination of the conflict at New River Church of Christ has been a learning experience on many levels. I have gained new insights into myself, the others involved and the conflict itself. I have also discovered new ways to think about and view conflict generally. Clearly, the benefit of twenty years of hindsight, my own life experiences and my experience as a lawyer and mediator have assisted me in obtaining knowledge from this retrospective analysis. I am confident, however, that my learning has been especially aided by my recent study of conflict that has exposed me to concepts and principles, which were, heretofore, unknown to me. This includes mindfulness meditation that I can

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<sup>73</sup> Stone et al., *supra* note 38 at 89.

<sup>74</sup> Leonard L. Riskin, *Knowing Yourself: Mindfulness, in the Negotiator’s Fieldbook* (Christopher Honeyman & Andrea K. Sneider, eds., ABA, forthcoming 2006).

safely say was not only unknown to me until recently, but was something I could not have imagined myself participating in. Well, I have participated in it, and I am pretty lousy at it. But I'm learning. I'm learning to step back, slow down, wait, think, listen, and pay attention. It will be a long time, if ever, that I master these things. Just the learning process, however, has made me want to.

I know that I now look at conflict in general differently and that I will view specific conflicts differently than I once did. The New River conflict is a good example. If the elders, myself and everyone else involved had had a better understanding of conflicts and of disputes; and we had slowed down and taken the time to use that knowledge, things may very well have turned out differently. Certainly, the chances of recognizing the real sources of the conflict and the real issues involved would have been enhanced. The leaders of every organization should have some understanding of conflict and the needs that cause and perpetuate it. Because the elders at New River did not have this understanding, the needs of the participants to the conflict were never addressed, no real dialogue or listening occurred, and there was no consideration of alternatives. Accordingly, the dispute ended with an acrimonious "divorce" and no relationship between the disputants. It could have ended with an agreed and amicable parting and continued relationship.

Despite my advances in learning about conflict, I have not attained the level of wisdom of one of the respondents to my questionnaire. In response to my question about how he viewed conflict in general, he said: "Unavoidable. It can be a healthy growth experience that can increase intimacy and closeness if accepted, embraced and openly and respectfully dealt with. James 1:19: 'Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak

and slow to anger.”<sup>75</sup> Because of my advances in learning, however, I recognize and appreciate the conflict theory and dispute resolution principles contained in this response. Also, because of my recent exposure to mindfulness meditation, I see the words of the New Testament writer, James, in a new light. His admonition bears a striking resemblance to some of the benefits mindfulness meditation is intended to achieve. Mindfulness meditation is a method of moment-to-moment non-judgmental awareness that develops calmness of mind and body, less reactivity and greater effectiveness.<sup>75</sup>

In consideration of non-judgmental awareness, I hope that I have not come across as critical of any of the participants in this conflict. I have certainly not intended to. If I am learning anything, I hope it is to view situations like the New River Church of Christ conflict and the people involved with acceptance, understanding and an appreciation of perspective. Just to be sure, I’ll continue to listen to one of my favorite songwriters, Joe South.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Leonard Riskin, power point presentation, Understanding Conflict Class, University of Missouri Law School, September 25, 2006.

<sup>76</sup> Joe South, *Walk a Mile in My Shoes*. (Lowery Music Co., Inc. 1969) “Walk a mile in my shoes, walk a mile in my shoes. Before you abuse, criticize and accuse, walk a mile in my shoes.”