

## **One person's meat is another's poison": Developing a theology of conflict: the case of the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) in Zimbabwe**

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### **Abstract**

One of the basic theories commonly believed in the secular world today is that one person's meat is another person's poison. This follows the assumption that individuals and groups have needs, values and preferences which are often not compatible. In a real world, whenever these differences translate into conflict they are handled differently partly because the mechanisms employed in handling such conflicts are based on what a particular individual or group is more accustomed to. Unfortunately, not many Christian churches subscribes to the mantra: one person's meat is another's poison as a good number of Christians today are still pessimistic about conflict. The purpose of this paper is to argue that in Christian circles there is need to develop a deliberate theology of conflict that reflect conflict as a positive force that generates both growth and development of the church to counter the conventional view in the majority of churches that conflict is devilish. The paper employed the conceptual analysis on the Apostolic Faith Mission's (AFM) grievance handling procedure (GHP), insider participant observation and secondary sources relating to conflict in the AFM in Zimbabwe church. The analysis showed that intra-church conflicts in the AFM have negative impact on personal and group well-being (the church) given that conflict breeds divisions, hatred, breakaways amongst others. Furthermore, the paper found out that a highly adversarial approach towards conflict of all kinds is embodied in the GHP and some staff and pastors in particular, have responded with legal action against the church's disciplinary action on several occasions. In light of the identified problem, the paper recommended that a conflict resolution and mediation services (CR&MS) is a worthwhile programme especially looking at the high rate of dismissal, proliferation of independent ministries, case overloads and cases that go through the courts of law- a trend which undermines growth and development in the Church.

**Keywords:** Apostolic Faith Mission, Conflict, intra- Church, Grievance, pastor, theology, Zimbabwe

## **1. Introduction**

One of the basic theories commonly believed in the secular world today is that *one person's meat is another person's poison*. This follows the assumption that individuals and groups have needs, values and preferences which are often not compatible. In a real world, whenever these differences translate into conflict they are handled differently partly because the mechanisms employed in handling such conflicts are based on what a particular individual or group is more accustomed to. Unfortunately, not many Christian churches subscribes to the mantra: *one person's meat is another's poison* as a good number of Christians are still pessimistic about conflict. Considering that Zimbabwe boasts of having more than 80 percent of the total population claiming to be Christians, the church in Zimbabwe needs to come up with a theology of conflict that embrace conflict as normal and necessary in the life of the church. This paper examines the mantra *one person's meat is another person's poison* in the quest for developing a theology of conflict in the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) in Zimbabwe church, in particular. It analyses the nature, causes and consequences of conflicts involving pastors in the church under review with a view to draw appropriate conclusions on and recommendations. The paper argues that the mantra must be understood within the context of intra-church concept of cohesion and group identity.

## **2. Background and conceptual framework**

One of the biggest challenges for modern churches today is to admit that conflict is part and parcel of Christian life and growth. The majority of churches are busy churning out negative stories on conflict situations involving pastors as a good number of church members still feel that pastors are men and women of the cloth they should not be found conflicting with any ordinary church member or amongst themselves. However, conflict is vital if pastors and the generality of people in the church, if the church is to extricate itself out of stagnation, inefficiency and ineffectiveness.

The term conflict is very elusive and therefore a singular definition to the satisfaction of all individuals or groups. In simpler terms, conflict can be thought of in terms of to a disagreement, misunderstanding, tension, clash of views, quarrel, fight, struggle, the list is endless. Although

the meanings of these words seem to differ, there are however, some overlaps. The bottom line is conflict occurs whenever there is an incompatibility between two or more people at any given point in time.

Over the years, conflict involving pastors has been a major characteristic feature in the AFM in Zimbabwe. Ever since the establishment of the AFM in Zimbabwe, formerly Rhodesian African Church in 1915, it was largely run under the supervision of the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa but even then conflicts involving men and women of the cloth have been an integral part of the church's life. Self-autonomy by the AFM in Zimbabwe in 1989 ushered in a new era in which the church experienced a myriad of conflict situations head-on involving pastors and the majority of cases involved sexual immorality, drunkenness, misappropriation of church funds, confiscation of church properties, squabbles over leadership positions and personality clashes. Chapter 13 of the church Constitution amended in 1976, 1995 and 2001 testify to the prevalence of conflict situations in the AFM in Zimbabwe. Areas of conflict addressed in Chapter 13 were *abstinence from liquor; adultery; fornication; divorce; abortion; murder; robbery and fraud* among other areas. This list of potential areas of conflict in the church Constitution confirms the extent to which the church was grappling with conflicts of this nature.

Dealing with conflicts involving pastors in the AFM in Zimbabwe has always been problematic from the outset. For instance, in 2007, due to escalating levels of conflict, addressing such conflicts has always been characterized by high rate of suspension of pastors, case overloads and cases that end up in courts of law. The increasing cases of conflict raised some intriguing perspectives regarding mechanisms for addressing conflict. However, prior to 2007, the church largely employed church discipline as its primary response mechanism to conflict in which the offender was given a period of censure ranging from three months to 12 months depending on the nature of the offence (see church Constitution, Chapter 13). By 2007, the rising conflict situations began to be perceived as a potential threat the life of the church and this reality contributed immensely to the creation of an internal conflict handling mechanisms called the code of conduct and grievance handling procedure (CCGHP). Put simply, the AFM in Zimbabwe

acknowledged that conflict in itself was not necessarily a vice, but a challenge, which when carefully handled may benefit the church and society at large.

A study by Chivasa (2012) on intra-church conflicts in the AFM in Zimbabwe between 1990 and 2006 highlighted the need for the church to pay particular attention to conflict involving pastors. He found out that the nature of conflict involving pastors' involved sexual immorality, intra-provincial transfer of pastors, creation of new assemblies, and misappropriation of church funds. The most pronounced areas of conflicts identified were immoral behavior by pastors, uneven distribution of church resources, and electoral process to cite but a few. The consequences of these conflicts involved erosion of the fear of God, divisions, proliferation of independent ministries, chronic antagonism and hatred among church leadership and members. He recommended that the AFM in Zimbabwe should develop "a perspective that conflict is a positive force that can help to mobilize efficiency in the church" (ibid, 69) and that pastors should be trained in conflict resolution skills as this will benefit the church to deal with intra-church conflicts constructively.

Intra-church conflict can be thought of in terms of an interpersonal incompatibility involving individuals who are so close enough to influence each other in decision making processes. Like any other organization a church is made up of individuals (such as Sunday school teachers, ushers, deacons, deaconesses, elders, pastors, Overseers, presidents or Bishops) that influence each other. As each of these individuals in their different capacities attempt to meet their individual goals, interests and needs the behavior of one member affects the other thereby generating conflict situations. Unresolved conflicts have ripple effects on the operations and growth of the church.

### **3. Methodology**

The paper employed the conceptual analysis in order to clarify issues of conflict in the AFM in Zimbabwe CCGHP, existing literature on intra group conflicts and insider participant observations. The writer has both intimate and empirical knowledge on intra-church conflicts in

AFM. This paper seeks to understand how conflict is perceived and handled; results produced and propose appropriate measures to be taken on-board by the church under review.

#### **4. Findings**

The AFM in Zimbabwe CCGHP was designed to serve as; “a guideline of rules and standards of conduct and procedures aimed at promoting harmony and discipline, within the church” (Policy Document, p26). In order to evaluate the grievance handling system within AFM in Zimbabwe it is appropriate to reflect on the objectives of the CCGHP. The objectives of the code are:

- To establish uniform standards of code of conduct and maintain discipline within the church;
- To enable church leadership, full time, lay workers and general staff settle disputes among themselves;
- To outline acts which constitutes misconduct liable for disciplinary action;
- To state the disciplinary action which may be taken when the code is not adhered to;
- To take disciplinary action in the event of unacceptable conduct or behavior;
- To establish consistent, fair and prompt disciplinary procedures that seek to correct unacceptable behavior rather than punish it;
- To provide a vehicle or process for resolving grievances within the church.

The aim of the CCGHP was to resolve conflict in order to achieve harmony within the church, as a desired outcome and harmony is another aspect of a peaceful church. Simply, put, by creating a CCGHP the AFM in Zimbabwe seems to have accepted the reality which finds expression in the mantra: *one person's meat is another's poison* and so employing the CCGHP is an attempt to cope with intra-church conflict. The obvious question is whether the CCGHP as an internal conflict resolution mechanism has achieved its objectives or not since its ratification in 2007?

#### **5. Discussion**

##### **‘One person’s meat is another person’s poison...’ contextualizing the popular mantra**

Despite efforts by some individual Christians to demonize and suppress conflict, there have been positive efforts by church leadership to address conflict constructively. The setting up of the local board of elders, provincial committee and Apostolic Council to mediate conflict in the

church may also be interpreted as a positive development for constructive conflict resolution. The creation of the CCGHP may be regarded as an attempt to achieving sustainable outcomes out of conflict situations. However, these mechanisms have been queried for not being able to address conflict constructively as the majority of conflict situations have tended to take adversarial outcomes. Overall, the AFM in Zimbabwe has been credited for coming up with mechanisms to promote the nonviolent resolution of conflict. The mantra *one person's meat is another's poison* has been instrumental to the quest for constructive resolution of conflicts in AFM.

There are a number of critical points that the mantra brings to the fore. First it calls for the attention of two individuals to understand that what is meat on one hand can be poison on the other. The term 'meat' is used here to mean those things that are of interests to individuals while 'poison' prefigures not only dislikes but things that individuals cannot live with. It appeals to individuals and groups to stop fighting over their differences as this would never change existing differences. In this way, individuals are urged to accept the realities of life that people differ in terms of interests, needs and preferences.

Second and final, this mantra appeals for individual responsibility to respect the likes and dislikes of other people. The mantra appeals to individuals and groups to understand the dynamics of conflict that it takes two to tango. The mantra is informative and valuable in that it provides people with information that conflict is very basic. It challenges the belief that conflict comes from the devil by highlighting individual responsibilities in choosing personal interests, needs and preferences over those of others. Thus, to say *one person's meat is another's poison* is to say people will always experience a clash of views, friction or disagree in life. It is also to say that people experience conflict over what they perceive as threats to their personal interests, needs or preferences. When individuals or groups fight over their interests, needs or preferences peace is ruptured. To consciously appreciate that conflict result from personal interests, needs or preferences is to accept that conflict is inevitable and part of everyday life. Conflict does not come from the devil: it emanates from individual desires to pursue personal interests, needs and

preferences with no regard for other people's interests. The mantra then reminds us all of our role in creating conflict in our day to day lives as we interact at church with fellow members and elsewhere. Conflict occurs when each church member in their various capacities whether as deacons, deaconesses, pastors or bishops attempts to undermine the interests of other church members. To a large extent, this mantra therefore is a reminder to all AFM in Zimbabwe church members and the whole Christian community that individuals are central to creating interpersonal conflicts.

Finally, the mantra acknowledges the role of the 'other' in creating conflict. In fact, there may be no interpersonal conflict if only one person was involved and a one-person conflict is popularly understood as intra-personal. *One person's meat...* echoes loudly to one party to the conflict that it takes another person for an interpersonal conflict to be created. The mantra makes a deliberate attempt to create the: *us* and *them* dichotomy, thus suggesting that conflict occurs when other individuals makes the attempt to embrace sectarianism. This mantra confirms that the entire Christian community is involved in creating conflict in the church. In that sense, the mantra puts responsibility to every member of the church to take responsibility in addressing conflict amicably.

### **Rethinking methods of addressing conflict in the AFM in Zimbabwe**

It appears, the current internal mechanisms are under heavy strain, as evidenced by the rate of dismissal of pastors, case overloads and cases that end up in courts of law. Drastic actions such as that a pastor can decide to leave the church unceremoniously or is dismissed constitute destructive conflict patterns which normally do not resolve the conflict but serves to blow it out of proportion (Schrock-Shenk et al., 1999). Also, incidences of case overloads in dealing with conflicts in the church suggest that a large percentage of staff, pastors in particular, have no or little training in conflict resolution. Further to that, the fact that the CCGHP was created to deal with conflicts without necessarily going through the courts yet there are still some conflicts that go through courts brings to mind a myriad of questions as to whether the CCGHP is really achieving its objectives or not. In view of this, one can assume that the capacity of the GHP is

not as effective as it was hoped given that some conflicts, particularly conflicts that continue for an extended period, end up in courts of law thereby creating instability in the church. In the same vein, it can be assumed that going through the route of the courts of law is an indication that the internal conflict handling mechanisms of the AFM in Zimbabwe are either not used properly or they are not fully understood (Bendman, 2006). It should be noted that conflicts that go through the court are costly and that route is not a sensible investment for the AFM in Zimbabwe church to undertake.

There are two critical elements to note about the CCGHP. The first is that, it is premised on the fact that conflict is a reality of life, on one hand. On the other, it appears, conflict is regarded as a social ill that always negates development and a source of all distressed relationships that militates against harmony sustenance. In fact, phrases used such as ‘offences, investigations, judges, discipline, dismissal, charges, judgment, appeal committee, warning, breach’ (AFM Constitution, Cap.14) are negative overtones derived from the criminal law model. The criminal law model basically comes from the assumption that criminals or offenders must be made to suffer (Kotze, 2008). In that case, when a conflict occurs or an offence is committed this model creates adversarial relationships (that is winners and losers) because “the common response is to find a scapegoat who is seen as the cause of problems” (Schrock-Shenk et al., 1999:17) and to ensure that the culprit is shunned or brought to book.

Second, the CCGHP is based on power and rights based principles. In the power-based, responsibility to deal with conflict as is often the case in AFM is given to a senior person such as the pastor, overseer or president. Under this model, power to make decision is lodged in the hands of a senior person which means power to decide the outcome of conflict is based on rank or status. In this case, the most powerful party typically wins while the less powerful loses. In a real world, this kind of approach to conflict normally breeds winners and losers which means that the conflict may re-appear because it remains unresolved (Harris, 2007). Only a mutually satisfying outcome of a conflict guarantees resolution of a conflict.



In the rights-based approach, the management (which in this case is the provincial committee or the Apostolic Council) relies heavily on policies, rules and regulations in determining the outcome of a conflict. Under this model, the management ensures that rules are observed and if not adhered to penalties are enforced. In the process of enforcing penalties the offender is often not consulted and at this level the ultimate goal in most cases is to defeat the perceived enemy thereby creating a win-lose contest. In some sense the conflict might seem to have disappeared but because there is a winner and loser it may come again but at a higher cost (Harris, 2007).

Having said this, it should be understood that conflict resolution is based on dialogue between the conflicting parties. It takes the parties (offender and victim, in this case the pastor and the aggrieved assembly or vice versa) to cooperatively work together, to listen to each other, not with the intention of winning a debate but to understand each other's position, interests and needs. Dialogue requires skills such as empathy that is "...to listen with the ears of your opponent, see with the eyes of your opponent and feel with the heart of your opponent." Lack of empathy causes the parties to a conflict to get caught up and lost in the "dog-eat-dog competition..." (Snyman, 2002:43). Another indispensable skill that sustains dialogue is open communication as someone said: "people don't get along because they fear each other. People fear each other because they don't know each other. They don't know each other because they have not properly communicated with each other (Snyman, 2002:43). Thus, dialogue between the parties (offender and victim) can potentially yield win-win outcomes a central feature in conflict resolution.

To this end, both leadership and followership in the AFM in Zimbabwe church may need to admit that the current internal conflict handling mechanisms do not always produce win-win outcomes and possible reasons for this are that they are derived from the criminal law model. Also, the CCGHP appears to use power and rights –based approaches to conflict which result in win/lose outcomes.

### **Developing a theology of conflict: Rethinking conflict resolution**

Theology is taken to mean basic assumptions that conflict has the potential for improving relationships and that it is a positive force for the growth of the church and that it requires constructive engagements by the parties to a conflict in order to produce a mutually satisfying solution. However, for the past decades, efforts to achieve sustainable solutions to conflict in the AFM in Zimbabwe have not been forthcoming as mentioned already. One of the huddles to achieving mutually satisfying solutions is the negative view of conflict by the generality of church members (Chivasa, 2012). However, in order to move towards basic assumptions that conflict is beneficial and valuable, the church at large must accept responsibility for any conflict experienced in the past and those that will occur in future and strategically develop a perception that conflict involving groups is unavoidable because *one person's meat is another's poison*. The major challenge of late has been that, conflict has always been perceived as satanic and a force that militates against harmony sustenance. This perception created that conflict is not humanly. One wonders whether this is really true because there is nothing satanic about conflict. Conflict is humanly and neutral-the direction it takes is determined by the responses of the parties to a conflict. Dealing with conflict involving groups requires the entire church to take it seriously and developing basic assumptions that there is nothing satanic about conflict. Pastors, local board of elders, the provincial committee and Apostolic Council must develop positive assumptions about conflict. They can conduct conflict resolution training workshops, seminars or bible study sessions in order to deepen their appreciation of conflict as a positive force. In other quarters, it has been argued that training in conflict resolution is not the core of Christianity; this paper contends that training in conflict resolution is a worthwhile investment for church and must be promoted.

## **6. Conclusion and recommendations: conflict resolution and mediation services for the AFM in Zimbabwe**

As argued above, typical conflicts which occur within AFM in Zimbabwe have negative impact on personal and group well-being (the church) given that conflict breeds divisions, hatred, breakaways amongst others. Evidence has shown that the approach to conflict in the AFM appears to favor adversarial position taking because it is based on the criminal law model

[retributive justice]. In short, a highly adversarial approach towards conflict of all kinds is embodied in the CCGHP and some staff, pastors in particular have responded with legal action against the church's disciplinary action on several occasions. In fact, there is even evidence which indicates that a large number of cases involving pastors and the church are dealt with each year by the courts, a clear indication that the relationship between the church and some pastors is an adversarial one. In a real world, adversaries fight; one wins while another loses, which means that sooner or later the conflict may re-emerge but at a higher cost. This proposal takes as its premise that a conflict resolution and mediation services (CR&MS) is a worthwhile programme especially looking at the high rate of dismissal, proliferation of independent ministries, case overloads and cases that go through the courts of law. CR&MS if it is to function within the church's system it can help to carry the responsibility to train and empower pastors and church members at large to deal with conflicts quickly and effectively and provide mediation support if pastor's efforts are unsuccessful.

Based on the above facts, the CR&MS would have four main functions:

- To train lay-workers to deal with group conflicts at local church level.
- To train pastors in workplace conflict resolution facilitation processes.
- To act as a mediation service for pastors who have tried to resolve conflict but have not succeeded.
- To develop a theology of conflict

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