



# TUNING UP

Common Conflicts and Resolution Strategies  
Among New Thought Ministers and Music Directors

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# Tuning Up: Common Conflicts and Solution Strategies Among New Thought Ministers and Music Directors

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Beginning in May 2012, I conducted a research project using targeted interviews and a larger anonymous survey of ministers and music directors asking two questions:

- 1. What are the most common conflicts you’ve observed between senior ministers and their music directors?**
- 2. What are the most effective specific strategies that you have seen for dealing with conflicts?**

Below is a summary of the responses, as well as some discussion of the topics they raised, with selected quotes. I received responses from 12 of the targeted interview subjects, and anonymous responses from 30, representing a wide range of viewpoints and often contradictory opinion. Respondents included ministers and MD’s from several regions across the U.S., large and small churches, with experience ranging from brand new to 25+ years in the field. I thank Becky Thatcher for her invaluable assistance in analysis of the response text, as well as all the survey respondents, for their candor and generosity. Most deep thanks to Rev. Karen Lindvig and the amazing staff at Seattle Unity, where I serve as Music Director.

## Goal

My goal was to provide a sounding board and potential solution strategies for Music Directors (MD’s) and Senior Ministers in current conflict situations, as well as to help MD’s and ministers address everyday disagreements before they become destructive.

The paper format should allow a reader in current conflict to scan directly to discussion of his particular issue, and then follow citation notes to further reading on those subjects.

## Results at a Glance

Top 5 common conflict areas:

- Communication failures, especially late talk title/topic
- Taste/quality issues
- Control/turf struggles
- Trust/respect and other issues around relationship skills
- Pay

Top 5 general solution areas:

- Active communication system, especially regular meetings
- Clear documentation of roles and expectations
- Honest, positive communication guidelines and protocols
- Flexibility, mutual willingness to change
- Quitting/firing or otherwise ending the relationship

## SUPPORTING RESEARCH

### Learning from Other Contexts

New Thought churches have their own contextual quirks, but there's still much to be learned by examining workplace conflict and standards of professionalism in general industry and other church denominations, as well as materials from secular counseling and mediation resources. We are special, but that doesn't necessitate being especially dysfunctional.

High value companies have long known that unmanaged workplace conflict lowers productivity, so unsurprisingly, entire industries revolve around management training on conflict [\[1\]](#). Also, the recovery and addiction treatment fields have plenty of experience with conflict management [\[2\]](#), as do the mental health and relationship counseling industries [\[3\]](#).

Some larger church denominations publish conflict-management materials, [\[4\]](#) and even distribute centralized recommendations, or "best practices", for staffing and HR activities. [\[5\]](#)

Few of our NT churches have resources to hire an actual Human Resources manager or buy a Management Training program. Further, our current training paths spend little time establishing norms around the management of NT music ministry. The Unity school does invite Richard Mekdeci to speak to their ministerial students, and with Sue Riley he has also published a handbook on music ministry in New Thought churches. [\[6\]](#) Still, ministers and MD's have so much to do, they rarely examine conflict resolution closely until the need is urgent. If the materials from these other professional contexts are correct, that would be a bit too late.

## Reframing Conflict

Because these surveys depended on self-reporting, it's worth noting that conflict is potentially a shameful subject in our NT culture. 10 of the 42 respondents reported no experience at all with MD/minister conflict. However, some of the 'no conflict' answers in the non-anonymous pool were from people I was certain had witnessed it. Beyond my subjective error, I wonder if we are wary of acknowledging or examining conflict.

No one wants to be the person who attracts trouble, complains, or accentuates the negative. However, a review of more general conflict resolution literature suggests that conflict may not be entirely avoidable, or entirely bad, but potentially an important part of the creative process and an innovation driver in the business world. [7]

One survey respondent noted: *"The LEAST effective strategy is treating conflict as a 'problem' or as 'abnormal' - which means the MOST effective strategy is accepting conflict as part of the process that will result in the best possible outcome on Sunday."*

The NT community's commitment to peace and positivity need not be a handicap to our professionalism or managerial capabilities. There are many conflict and communication approaches that meld well with New Thought philosophy: e.g. Compassionate Communication [8], Collaborative Communication [9], Non-violent Communication [10], Giraffe language, Love Languages, Differentiation and Attachment Theory in relationships, NLP, etc. Methods like these help us move gracefully through conflict rather than habitually attempt to avoid it.

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## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Specific solution strategies are presented within each problem category section. More general solution strategies, applicable to many conflict types, are presented starting on p. 14.

### Problem: Late Communication of Topic Information

This relatively narrow issue only applies to programs that attempt to match music and message, yet it appeared more frequently than any other single specific problem, even in relationships otherwise described as excellent.



MD's may always want more lead time in knowing the topic, because time affects quality. Surprisingly, some churches' normal lead times are three months, some are two weeks and some are five days. The actual amount of time may be less important as a cause of conflict than simply missing the program's mutually agreed deadline.

Practical impacts included reduced repertoire choices (e.g. no time to order a chart or recording), reduced rehearsal time, reduced communication time, reduced hiring choices, reduced ability to use volunteers (who require additional rehearsal time), increased cost (e.g. no time to borrow, must purchase charts online, or pay more for quick-learner pro players); overall, reduced quality and increased stress. Assessment of musical product is also obscured by blame: “Well, if you had given me enough time...”

Impacts on relationship ranged from light to severe. The MD may feel simple irritation, or may feel hobbled, disempowered, and humiliated. The MD and music team may view the minister’s delay as inconsiderate, irresponsible, unprofessional, and selfish. Last minute change of topic had similar impacts, but with an added “pulled the rug out” dimension as well.

Meanwhile, ministers may feel inhibited and exhausted by the constant stream of deadlines and nagging, which contributes to the blockage that delays inspiration. Given the many varied demands on ministerial time and energy, ministers may also feel that MD’s are short-sighted, judgmental, rigid, insubordinate, and selfish themselves.

Fortunately, discussion of this common problem also yielded several specific solutions.

#### Potential Solution Strategies for Topic/Timing Issues

**Revisit the agreement.** The deadline for info exchange may not have been clear: “I’ll TRY to get the information to you by Tuesday. Sometimes Thursday. Rarely Saturday.” Or maybe it was set, but it was aspirational – that is, the minister *wants* to get the info out by Wednesday because she knows the music match will be better, quality will be higher, and expenses lower, but she regularly misses the goal because her natural pacing has been, and may always be, Saturday night. Re-set the deadline realistically and clearly.

**Release the desire to match.** Matching is a Good, but if the minister regularly misses the deadline, it may not be the highest priority Good for this ministry. Some successful churches, including Agape, don’t worry about matching at all. Some only match occasionally. An honest discussion among church leadership may be necessary to assess the real institutional value of thematic coherence over spontaneity.

**Implement failsafe (Plan B).** If the minister has not delivered the message topic by the mutually agreed upon deadline, MD simply moves to the plan B without nagging or judgment. He may send a gentle note saying something like “we haven’t seen any topic information, so we’re going to move to the alternate criteria to choose the music.” The criteria for Plan B is discussed and prioritized with the minister well beforehand.

**Hold flexible singalong slots.** Like a “market special” at a restaurant, keep one or two singalong slots open until the last minute for tunes that can be plugged in as late as possible, to capture the freshest flavor. Build your own Easy Singalong Index [11] which organizes such tunes by topic, title and tempo to ease last-minute song selection.

**Improvise.** Not everyone has the skill to take an improvisational risk, but some performers and soloists can spontaneously choose, perform, or even compose music on the spot. Done well, it's impressive, exciting, and vibrant. Done poorly or under duress, it can mean bad product, high stress and loss of trust.

**Allow occasional two-way flow on topic.** In situations where topic is slow in coming and deadline is missed, the MD chooses tunes according to other priorities. She sends music choices to the minister, who may be able to use them as inspiration and gain topic match from this reverse direction. This is not recommended as a frequent practice, due to leadership confusion. But used sparingly in a cooperative spirit, this strategy can create coherence in a service that otherwise might have had none.

Once a practical solution to the lead-time problem is addressed, consider, too, any potential longer impact of the emotional damage already done to the relationship. Does the MD trust the minister's leadership and professionalism? Does the minister respect the MD's skills and judgment? See section below on Trust/Respect.

A sampling of survey quotes on topic timing:

*Note that all quotes are kept anonymous.*

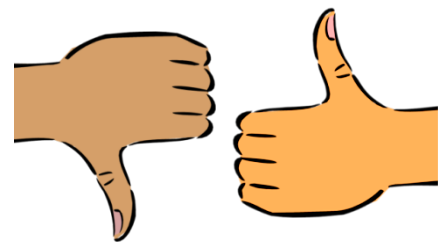
*"The most common conflict I have is that sometimes I don't receive the message topic until so late in the week that it's really a scramble to come up with congregational songs and to pass along the topic to the guest musician in a timely manner. In some cases, I just have to pick music that is not based on the topic."*

*"We choose the music two or three months ahead, and the minister chooses the topic for the message two or three days ahead, so it's hit and miss whether they go together."*

*"Within three weeks of a Sunday, if information about the service is still missing, the music is programmed according to different criteria: such as singer preference, Season for Nonviolence, other holidays (national, religious, etc.), or pure whim. Sometimes the song choices then become the inspiration for the talk title."*

### Problem: Disagreement Over Taste/Quality Standards

In many cases, conflict over taste differences is also conflict over turf (see section below), but taste was mentioned by survey respondents often enough to merit its own discussion.



Taste in music is as subjective as taste in food, literature, architecture, fashion, etc. [12] There's a little human biology in play, and a lot of cultural context, two variables that combine to become even more variable. This variable nature seems obvious, and yet we often assume that it's also "obvious" this or that song is better or worse. It's not.

Impacts: Genre and quality of music and can have major effects on attendance, demographic and church growth. Therefore, for the context of a church service, the question “is this good music” is not as salient as “does this music do its job?” Not “should the MD’s taste or the minister’s taste prevail?” but “Does it serve our congregation and our church’s goals? What is their taste?”

A musical “taste” conflict may also point to a larger, ongoing dissatisfaction with MD job performance. A minister may feel fundamentally disappointed with the skills and abilities of her music director. This becomes a personnel issue requiring good managerial skills to determine proper course, whether it means more professional development, improvement plans or a responsible termination process.

### Potential Solution Strategies for Taste/Quality Issues

**Map the Good.** This is a specific exercise for three or more stakeholders in the music ministry. [13] Each ministry’s definition of “most desirable music” is unique, and can change radically over time. Using elements of Appreciative Inquiry [14], the Mapping the Good exercise reveals current values and unifies priorities.

**Get expert opinions.** NT churches need to know the tastes of our demographic (and target demographic) like a marketing firm would know it. It is not enough to say “we’ll assume our demographic is me – my age group, gender, race, background, and taste.” That market will age and shrink. Professional marketing assistance widens and updates the appeal, and helps us avoid the trap of thinking that if I like it, that means it’s good. Visit the controversial ChurchMarketingSucks.com website for a first step into the world of church marketing. [15]

**Use responsible assessment systems.** Do we settle for adequate, until there’s a crisis? Do we navigate our destiny by oiling the squeaky wheels? Good quality-assurance systems are 1) integrated right/left brain, that is, qualitative *and* quantitative measures, 2) sustainable and disciplined, 3) multidirectional, and 4) actionable. For examples on designing and implementing assessment systems from simple to exhaustive, see “Real QA for Music Ministries [16].

**Kill your pet peeves.** Perhaps you have some high maintenance person in your church who complains about every little thing: you didn’t sing a hymnal tune this week, the singalongs had verses instead of being fully singalongable, you sang a verse you didn’t print, the songs went over 3 minutes, the singer spoke an intro, a singer wore sneakers, a band member looked at his phone during the talk, the service was 5 minutes too long, that awful person got a solo, someone called it a “show” and not a service, someone left the room during the second service, someone sang a Michael Jackson song, someone’s hose had a run, someone parked in the wrong place, someone bowed in a way that seemed Vegas-y.

We learn to ignore these people and their crowded zoo full of pet peeves. But MD’s and ministers sometimes defend their peeves, saying “After all, it’s my party.” Is it, really?

The philosophy that says “obey the many arbitrary and idiosyncratic rules that one person decided on” is worthy of inquiry, in light of New Thought’s cultural norms. Moreover, a leader’s peeves are landmines in the creative field, restricting everyone else’s movement.

A sampling of survey quotes on the topic of taste/quality:

*“I’ve often told my music director, we are only as good as our last performance. I am only as good as my last talk. We should ask ourselves every week how can we make our work more excellent.”*

*“In my experience, one of the biggest and most persistent problems is when the music director likes a song or artist but the senior minister does not, and you have to be the heavy to cut someone or something when you don’t really want to. Another problem arises when you’re working with volunteer congregant musicians who you are trying to develop but the minister doesn’t think they’re ready for ‘prime time.’ I’ve solved that in the past by creating other performance opportunities other than Sundays (talent shows, special concerts or events) which give the congregant opportunities to build their performance chops without exposing them to ‘failure’ in Sunday service.”*

*“-- Insistence that ‘everyone, whether they can sing or not’ be included in Christmas and Easter choir”*

*“Views of ‘what sells’ the congregation, meaning that sometimes the minister and director don’t see eye to eye on what they think will minister to people as well as bring first timers back for more.”*

### Problem: Control/Turf Wars

Most senior ministers feel that responsibility for the service is ultimately theirs. Some interpret that to mean they need to personally approve all choices from booking, to repertoire, schedule, attire, etc. Others consider this micro-managing. What is hands-on from one perspective may be strangling from another, but either method can succeed if the team accepts it. Variation may be due to personality, size and nature of the church, expertise of staff, etc.



The impact of micromanaging is serious: reduced employee morale, motivation, happiness, creativity and collaborative power, as well as wasted time, and damaged reputation among congregation and community. [\[17\]](#) The practice itself also runs counter to many New Thought Prosperity principles.

However, there are also employees who resist being managed at all, even at light levels of supervision, and many of these “uncoachables” are artists. [\[18\]](#) In both cases, the vision and mission of the institution become secondary to a personality.



## Potential Solution Strategies for Control/Turf War Issues

**Clarify the roles.** At the time of hiring, a job description that clarifies reporting structure helps establish good boundaries and sets a standard of professionalism. Still, without adherence to these structures, the relationship can slide into unconscious roles from other contexts. Are you Employee/boss or Contractor/client; Producer/director or collaborators; rivals, teammates, siblings; parent/child or Enforcer/Rebel; Captain/Lieutenant; Diva/Minion; Pilot/Flight attendant; Shepherd/sheep; Mary/Martha; Right brain/left brain. Many strange pairings *can* work, if both parties agree. Co-ministries (2 senior ministers) multiply the potential for role confusion, and greatly increase the need for clear boundaries. Speak honestly when you feel out of integrity with the roles, and together, edit the job description annually for accuracy.

**Clarify the duties:** Build and maintain a Policies and Procedures folder. P&P documents include some of the WHY [19], but also can include the detailed HOW of everyday activities [20]. For instance: we meet weekly, we use daily email for communications, we use our library like this, we print and copy like this, we pay royalties like this, we tithe like this, etc. In an emergency (*like a sudden firing or quitting*), this document is a huge help to a substitute MD, but creating it also helps MD and minister to share practical understanding. “Oh! I didn’t realize how you did that! Now I see why you were worried about timing...”

**Consider the stakes.** Unlike brain surgery or rocket science, the world of church music does not often involve life-or-death details. Will the use of this particular song, singer, or lyric truly result in the loss of a significant amount of offering, so much so that it’s necessary to undercut the MD’s authority by interrupting this rehearsal? Or would it be better to let the service go on and give quality improvement feedback at the regular weekly meeting?

**Target the real issue.** Even for small things that you can let go in the moment, it’s wise to observe directionality and bring out underlying issues that the small stuff is pointing towards; those truly ARE important.

For example, one respondent described a minister who asked to be CC’d on all music ministry emails. This is a classic example of micro-managing, but the MD agreed to do it because ‘why sweat the small stuff’. But there is a larger issue here. From a standard management view, monitoring all emails on an employee is appropriate as part of 1) a training process for new employees, or 2) a disciplinary review process or formal Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) [21]. In either case, there is a lack of confidence in the employee, so much so that the minister is willing to greatly increase his/her own email load to ensure deeper level oversight. That is the area that requires discussion.

A sampling of survey quotes on control/turf wars:

*“Who should pick the music. Seriously, let the minister pick his/her talk titles and let the Music Director design the music around it.”*

*“Power struggles (usually boils down to binary, only-one-of-us-is-in-charge v. win-win/team work issues), also related to ‘differing leadership styles’”*

*“Having a protocol/chain of command IN PLACE and OBSERVED is vital.”*

*“Again, we don't have any conflicts that I'm aware of. But perhaps that is because our strategy is co-creation rather than a hierarchy. Regular communication, but allowing the Music Director to make choices, artistic and otherwise, about the music.”*

*“Clear job descriptions, clear objectives.”*

*“Telling people exactly what you expect of them and letting them be creative in their effort to create what you require. It's the only way.”*

*“My former minister updated my job description without telling me, changing my title from ‘director’ to ‘coordinator’. No explanation.”*

#### Problem: Loss of Trust/Respect and Other Relationship Snags



The most emotionally taxing problems described in our survey involved destruction of trust or respect in the MD/minister relationship. Other literature on workplace conflict reflects this level of importance [22]. Impacts include reduced creativity and innovation, lowered morale, reduced productivity, triangulation and factionalism, creating toxic atmosphere that can lower church attendance and even threaten institutional stability.

Trust and respect are earned over time, so their loss can seem insurmountable: how do I trust someone who has proven problems around reliability? How do I respect someone if his competence is in serious doubt?

But just as good manners help strangers interact smoothly, the practices of *professionalism* help employee and employer build a history that merits trust and respect as well as functionality even through disagreement or institutional crisis.

Many of the strategies for building and repairing lost trust and respect are simply elements of increased professionalism. This can feel counter-intuitive to people for whom the concept of trust involves informality, familiarity, or personal intimacy. However, some of the most profound applications of Loving Kindness require discipline and boundaries.

Potential solution strategies:

**Meet regularly:** This was the specific strategy mentioned most often, and possibly the most valuable piece of the entire survey. Just like in physical training, the consistency is more important than the intensity. In-person meetings save more time than they take.

**Conduct, and accept, honest assessment.** Was a goal missed, or a promise broken? It's tempting to just move the bar, or worse - roll your eyes. Instead, take the heat and kindly tell the truth, even when it's hard to do. This behavior modeled from the top quickly becomes the dominant culture.

Use responsible assessment systems (see entry in taste/quality section above) to pinpoint any real job performance issues, and identify priority areas for energy focus. Disciplined critique systems are less influenced by personal mood, bias and anxiety.

Many of us don't tell the truth because we don't want to hear the truth back. For every truth you tell, be ready to hear one of the same strength or stronger. To be heard, we must listen.

**Share regular Organizational Development activities.** The Org Dev industry is brimming with tools for groups looking to make systemic improvement, from Effective Communication training [23] to Spiritual Visioning [24] to Strategic Planning [25]. The Consultant's Book of Organizational Development Tools offers a full menu of choices. [26] Make the time regularly for this type of effort. We go to church every week, and we still don't follow principle perfectly, so why expect that a once-in-five-years pass at organizational training would work?

**Share a team bonding experience.** Ropes courses, boat rides, group social events, etc., - a team bonding experience can shift negative patterns and create positive memories. Chosen poorly, though, they can make things worse. "Who can build a bridge out of toothpicks the fastest" may feel like time stolen from deadline-pressed workers, forced into competing factions, given impossible tasks, without the tools to succeed, because of a whim from above. Use group input to choose wisely.

**Do regular professional development projects.** Plan, schedule, fund and report on any projects that may add or deepen the skillbase: e.g. attending classes or conferences like Asilomar [27] or Sound Connections [28], doing a challenging concert or recording project, hosting a networking lunch, publishing a paper, etc. Without frequent professional development, our competencies and relevance will wane, and with it, respect from colleagues. Model life-long learning from the top, and support it with budget for employees.

A sampling of survey quotes on trust/respect issues:

*"Lack of respect - The minister thinks they know music better than the music director and the music director thinks they can minister better than the Reverend."*

*"Another problem I created was not telling the minister things I was observing or feeling because I didn't want to 'burden' the minister or 'create waves'.... big mistake. Trust is only possible when you are authentic. Maybe what you have to say is something the minister needs to hear. Maybe you're completely off base, but you won't know until you bring it forward. Being willing to 'be wrong' is a strength."*

*"I do weekly critique of my music first - minister adds on notes only when she needs to."*

*“—Rarely responds to my emails (but later accuses me of failure to provide timely info)—Often doesn’t return my phone calls—More often cancels planned meetings between the two of us than we actually get together—BUT When we CAN manage to get together (in person or even over the phone) we have been effective on bridging differences and compromising.”*

*“Use 5 Love Languages techniques — discover what your minister values and give them that (maybe only that, for efficiency and resourcefulness sake). Gottman method: build a culture of appreciation by doing small things often and consistently. Honor their emotions. Ask open-ended questions. Hold cognitive space for them all the time, ask the Love Map questions.”*

*“I think it usually comes down to a lack of trust and communication. Having been on both sides (MD and minister) I can see that both truly want the best thing—that the congregants have a dynamic experience of God in the service. It’s the strategies to achieve the goal that often differ, with little regard to truly hearing the other perspective. Best strategies: Regular meetings/conversations; collaborative planning sessions; training in this area (conferences, seminars) for BOTH the minister and the music director.”*

### Problem: Pay Issues

There are successful minister/MD relationships at every pay scale, from both at \$60k+ to both as volunteers. The conflict is often not about absolute amounts, but expectations, status and priorities.



When someone states “they don’t pay me enough”, does that mean enough to live a middle class life, or enough to qualify as a fair hourly rate, enough of a percentage of the total budget compared to the other staff, enough relative to local market supply/demand, or enough to put up with some kind of unpleasantness?

Pay issues may bleed over into respect issues – e.g. “Don’t you think I’m worth paying a real wage?” Some of the respondents also mentioned conflicts around what to pay *other* performers, which suggests taste/quality issues (who is worth what), or turf conflict, too.

The solution strategies below are primarily types of reality checks, to clarify true cost and/or true value, but they don’t address those other, possibly more important, areas.

### Potential Solution Strategies for Pay Issues

**Go transparent.** Not every minister wants to lay the whole budget on the table for inspection, but if the MD has an idea that there’s more money in the system than there really is, then this type of reality check can be useful. Transparency is an excellent institutional practice overall, because it invites scrutiny and requires accountability.

**Audit actual hours.** Keep a completely accurate log for one week, two weeks or more, tracking exactly how many hours go into the music program – hourly, salaried, staff, and volunteer. Audits commonly find that *many* more hours are spent than the leaders planned, budgeted or asked for, a gap that puts the institution essentially out of integrity.

**Audit job description.** Review the P&P documents and job descriptions annually, and if tasks were added, account for them: were other tasks eliminated, or pay raised to compensate? “Job creep” is a common phenomenon, whereby new tasks are added, but no tasks are eliminated and pay does not rise. Workers “absorb” the change, either working additional volunteer hours on the new tasks, or spending less time on each single task, which reduces product quality and increases burn out, creating a scarcity-based culture of milking people dry.

**Scale to program sustainability.** For the positive, abundance-minded NT crowd, scaling back on hours, tasks, programs, staff, or even number of songs in a service can feel like failure. It’s really the strength of discipline, discernment, release and elimination. Practice the “no” that comes from responsible stewardship: “No, we’re taking a year off from the talent show, so that we can fund the cost-of-living pay raise for pro players. Otherwise, pro pay is effectively going down, and that’s not sustainable.”



Don’t forget to honor what is released in appropriate ways: thank you notes, reports, celebrations, burning bowl rituals, etc.

**Practice personal sustainability.** Reasonable people get grumpy if we reach age 50 without health insurance or a retirement plan. But if your church can hire a good MD without paying for health insurance, it will. Don’t be grumpy, but do be realistic. A church that puts a generous 12-15% of budget towards the music program is doing well, and that still may not be enough to fund the MD to a “livable” wage, depending on the bottom line.

Your highest good may be to go get a job at a larger church that can responsibly pay you the wage you want. Or it may be to get training, or relocate to a job in software or healthcare, and then actually *volunteer* your musical services for church. Live well, give well.

**Do local market research.** Market value is a comparison of realities: are there 5 other churches nearby where this MD could work, or none? Are there 5 other people nearby who could do what this MD does, or none? Ask the neighboring New Thought churches about their pay rates, and ask local musicians about their fees.

Some national level information is also useful, for example, from places like MusicianWages.com [29] or The Future of Music Coalition [30]. Richard Mekdeci recently estimated a good MD salary around \$20-25/hr. My own surveys of northwest regional artists from last year’s NW New Thought Music Forum show an extremely wide range of income levels. More importantly, though, they also suggested no connection between pay scale and satisfaction levels. [31]

A sampling of survey voices on pay issues:

*“Low pay”*

*“Cheaping out on pay”*

*“To pay or not to pay musicians. Wouldn't it be a most wonderful world if everyone was paid for the value that they bring to the table?”*

*“Educate ourselves on the value of our Sacred Music Services and pay the Director at least 3/4 of the Senior Minister's salary!!”*

*“We are often unable to offer a MD a realistic enough salary so as to have a true contractual working relationship. We therefore get stuck in a relationship that is less than peer to peer collaboration, and more like dating. We spend too much time trying to keep the other person “happy”. Way too much time playing footsie because we become afraid that our current MD is the best we can do with the little money we can offer, etc. None of this is really true but it is a common dynamic.”*

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## OTHER GENERAL STRATEGIES

Some solution strategies are applicable to wide range of problem types.



**Mediation.** Professional mediation consultant and experienced music director Cindy Akana explains: “A mediator creates a safe environment for all parties to resolve their conflicts peacefully and effectively. Mediators are impartial and are not invested in any particular side or outcome. They are responsible for facilitating the mediation process--making sure all parties have equal opportunities to express their views and wishes. Mediators help people think outside the box in regards to solutions. We help identify the real conflict and move towards solutions that work for all involved.”

Cindy runs Win-Win Resolutions in Seattle, [\[32\]](#) and she also offered this great list of “Five Signs It May Be Time to Call a Mediator”:

1. When both parties engage in the same non-productive disagreement/conflict over and over.
2. When one or both of you frequently feel misunderstood, manipulated, or devalued in the relationship.
3. When one or both of you avoid the other party just to keep the peace.
4. When anger or tempers are hard to control.
5. When you want a productive relationship instead of a "grin-and-bear-it" relationship.

*In my own personal experiences of workplace conflict, I found our mediator's assistance to be highly effective. Her position of authority helped me to stop feeling powerless. Her professionalism raised my own, and her centered, compassionate presence became a comfort and a model. - EMcG.*

**Communication Protocol Agreement.** This kind of covenant may have many different names – effective communication agreement, co-creator agreement [33], fair fighting rules [34], communication groundrules [35] – but they share some common ideas. Such agreements only work if all parties consciously agree to them.

One of the survey respondents generously included several especially pertinent examples, including a Choir Membership Agreement, a Respectful Communications Guide, and instructions for sharing circles during crisis, cited in full by permission. [36]

**Prayer, meditation and other spiritual practices.** Spiritual Practice, for those of us who are committed to a path, is a strategy to use during conflict in the same way that eating and drinking are: skipping it would make things worse.

Some gain value from praying together. Sharing meditation, prayer, classes, rituals and other spiritual experiences with your team can become a type of team bonding experience, certainly.



But forcing it negates its effectiveness. When you have a large problem, it can be frustrating to hear “all you need is a little more prayer,” especially if it’s from the mouth of the person you have the problem with. Conflicts arise even among people who pray and meditate diligently, and a conflict-free environment is not a stamp of sacred superiority.

When you are stressed by conflict, however, a *private* spiritual practice can center and strengthen you, help you feel “okay-in-yourself”, disentangling you from the contingencies of the moment and of other people.

Fortunately, we are rich in resources for pertinent spiritual practices around love, forgiveness, and peace. For example, the Metta meditation [37] which inspired the well known Karen Drucker tune “Loving Kindness” [38], practices from Deepak Choprah [39], or Thich Nhat Hanh’s “Breathing In” prayer from Creating True Peace [40]. The Fetzer Institute offers a whole menu of choices in different modes [41].

*A sampling of survey voices on spiritual practices:*

*“Again, prayer first. always prayer. We have discovered that underneath the ‘stuff’ that we have going on, we are both very important to each other as spiritual support and friends.”*



*"[Our minister] studies with Thich Naht Hanh and went to him specifically for the conflict I spoke of. She decided that the best approach to conflict resolution is his "Beginning Anew; Flower Watering." [The minister], XX, myself and XX (where the conflict started) got together one afternoon and practiced this ritual. There was peace after we finished, and I felt like we all heard each other. The one mistake we made was waiting too long to hold the circle."*

**Ending the relationship – firing.** Employers are always responsible for knowing the legal formalities of termination in their state and following smart guidelines to avoid blowback [42], but even basic tips are helpful for managers without specific training [43].

The NT church setting often presents additional challenges around termination. Some ministers find formal HR policies confusing or clinical. Some may deny the problem until it's beyond repair, then shortchange the documentation. A formal Performance Improvement Process [44] takes time and commitment, and it's tempting to just skip giving the person a chance, and get on with the firing. After all "It's my party," right?

But the commitment to serving the congregation is the best motive for facing the problem early, and using due diligence in process. How will firing the MD affect the church stability, staff and community? Who will cover duties and replace this person? Could there be legal repercussions? In answering these questions, it's wise to confide in another authority such as a business manager or skilled Board chair. Getting prayer and personal support is also important, given the nature of the industry. However, this type of support isn't about someone confirming your opinion, but about supporting you to make decisions from a calm center.

A sampling of survey voices on firing:

*"Hmmm. Hard one. Usually the music director has been there when the new minister comes in and it is hard to make changes right away without disturbing the congregational peace. I'm not sure I have ever seen any 'effective specific strategies'. Usually there is just whispered complaining, or covert manipulation to get one or the other to leave. Honesty would be the best, but art and the artist's craft are such sensitive issues. I think the entire staff ought to step down when a senior minister arrives; or don't place so much responsibility for the success of the church on the minister."*

*"Our 'conflicts' weren't really conflicts so much as problems I personally had with who he was."*

**Ending the relationship – quitting.** The internet era has taught us all that a job is not forever; workers are mobile. The things you take with you from job to job are your skills and your reputation. Both need to be growing all the time, because the society and culture surely are.





It's always possible to quit with grace, even when those bridges are begging to be burned. Your exit tells who you are, and again the standards of professionalism give even an angry or wounded person the tools to function with high integrity. Consult a good checklist early on, before you're even certain you want to quit, and definitely before you're bitter to the point of screaming [45]. Find a confidante who is truly confidential. When we stop emotionally venting into the business relationship itself, we often need a safe place to tell the truth.

What gets in the way of doing these smart, high integrity things? Poor boundaries, self-dramatizing, inertia and procrastination, fear, pride, shame, blame and anger. *"That @\$#% is forcing me out of my spiritual home into the streets to starve!"*

A good starting point for de-escalation and shifting perspective is to write brief but sincere thank you notes to several people. Keep content free of info about your conflict or potential departure and focus on thanks. You need not even deliver them yet, but the process of writing gratitude notes lifts us out of our drama, cools the heat of the moment, and puts us back into service, which is a graceful place from which to act. Then update your resume.

A sampling of survey voices on the topic:

*"I have tried everything, nothing works, which is why I have chosen to no longer be a NT music director."*

*"With some of the Sr Ministers it was like butter. I felt loved, honored, free to create and serve. They said things from the front of the room that made sense to me. What a joy! I worked with a couple where it was just very stable, no drama, no major expressions, just service as usual, and I worked with one where it was like sludge. There was nothing I could do right."*

*My own personal experiences leave me deeply grateful for the unburned bridges of my former positions at other churches. I continue to work with those staff and communities to our mutual benefit, with an increased feeling of community cohesion. – EmcG*

**Changing, not ending.** In a few situations, a change can obviate the need for a hard ending. For example, a senior minister may be moving into an emeritus position, or an MD position may be dividing into two positions enabling the former MD to focus on just choir direction or just band leading. In some cases, the addition of other staff, such as a creative producer or a new administrative support person, changes the dynamic and allows a conflict to ease.

In any of these cases, however, the root of the conflict can reactivate at any time if it has not been adequately addressed.

Another survey voice on change:

*"We are having a change of minister this summer, so after that we will explore strategies for better coordination."*

## CONCLUSIONS

Most people experience workplace conflict at some time in their careers, and most respondents in this project did as well. It is not certain that we can avoid conflict completely, or that we should attempt to.

Experiences of conflict often feel hopeless and intractable; as one respondent wrote: “*I have tried everything, nothing works.*” But in the gathering of collective experiences we discover more and more strategies that revive our hope and may lead us forward beyond the dead end. We discover the breadth of workable norms, which helps us release our attachment to particular positions, and we derive comfort from knowing that others have tread these paths before us.

To me personally, conflict is akin to dissonance in music: dissonance is tension, which leads to movement, and the *possibility* for transformation. It is what you make of it. In western music, the nasty dissonant minor 2<sup>nd</sup> becomes a dreamy major 7<sup>th</sup> if the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> show up, too. Knowing that transformation trick requires technical skill, and sharing it requires intention, so that other people can hear it, too. Listen: [\[46\]](#)



Erin McGaughan. August, 2012.

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