

**Understanding Conflict in One Local Church: A Single Case-Study
of St. John's United Church of Christ Springfield, Missouri,
Based on the Family Systems Theory**

Reverend Sol Codillo, Jr.

ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was threefold: (1) to show how one local church, such as St. John's United Church of Christ (UCC), can deal with inevitable changes that result in conflict within the church; (2) to demonstrate how the family systems theory as applied to a congregation can aid in understanding conflict; and (3) to share the lessons learned from this study concerning church conflict.

To understand conflict in one particular local church, the project began by tracing the history of the church and highlighting those significant changes that contributed to the conflict. In analyzing the conflict, several church members were interviewed in order to gain perspective on how each of them interpreted and experienced the perceived conflict. The project discusses how conflict is understood from a biblical and secular perspective.

In the chapter covering the review of literature, considerable material was found dealing with the family and the family systems theory, especially from the sociological, psychological, and anthropological point of view. It was discovered, however, that the family systems theory as applied to churches, synagogues, and congregations, is relatively new.

The author is convinced that a church such as St. John's UCC, which had been in denial for many years concerning their problem of conflict, is unable to resolve the conflict on its own. It takes someone, such as an understanding, responsive, and caring pastor, to bring about healing and wholeness to a conflicted congregation. Also, issues such as forgiveness, trust, love, openness, and integrity are important ingredients in resolving conflict.

The church, just as a family, must go through the process or cycle of growth and maturation. Sometimes during this process there are “building blocks” that can stifle growth and maturation. It is necessary that these “blocks” be minimized or altogether removed to avoid conflict. On the other hand, it is also important to remember that conflict is not necessarily bad or unhealthy. It is how a church or family deals with conflict that is indicative of health or ill health.

A strong and healthy church can be an effective instrument of God’s love, grace, and forgiveness in the world. The findings of this project clearly revealed that one way pastors and church leaders can bring understanding and resolution of conflict within the church is through the use of the family systems theory.