

The High Cost of Conflict Among Christians

by Ken Sande

You may know from first-hand experience that conflict among Christians is costly. But just how costly is it? I admit that it is difficult to quantify the spiritual cost of conflict—how do you measure the pain, suffering, and diminished witness caused by Christians who fight one another? Yet as I've looked at several studies in the United States, I think that it is possible (and reasonable) to estimate the more tangible costs of conflict. I believe you will find it both eye-opening and sobering.

Summary

Born again Christians in the U.S. file 4 to 8 million lawsuits every year, often against other Christians, costing 20 to 40 billion dollars.

There are approximately 19,000 major, scarring church conflicts in the U.S. each year (an average of 50 per day).

32% of born again Christians who have been married have gone through a divorce, virtually the same percentage as our general population.

1,500 pastors leave their assignments every month in the U.S. because of conflict, burnout, or moral failure, costing the church at least \$684 million each year.

Lawsuits Among Christians

20 million civil lawsuits are filed in state courts each year.¹

No attorney I have talked to thought that Christians were noticeably less likely to file a lawsuit than a non-Christian.

41% of American adults are "born again" (have made a personal commitment to Jesus and believe they will get into heaven because they trust in him).³

Estimated number of civil lawsuits filed by "born again" Christians: 4-8 million

20 million x .41 = 8 million (even if Christians sue at only half the rate of non-Christians, the number of suits would be 4 million)

Lawsuits typically cost \$50,000 or more for each party to litigate. Using just 1/10 of this amount (\$5,000), the estimated cost of lawsuits involving Christians would be \$20 billion to \$40 billion. (The figures would be even higher if you assumed that many of these cases involved believers on both sides).

Church Conflicts

25 percent of the churches in one survey reported conflict in the previous five years that was serious enough to have a lasting impact on congregational life.⁴

There are approximately 386,000 churches in America.⁵

There are approximately 19,000 major, scarring church conflicts in the U.S. each year (386,000 x 1/4 x 1/5).

Divorce

32% of born again Christians who have been married have gone through a divorce, as compared to 33% for our general population. The divorce rate for evangelical Christians is approximately 26%.⁶

On a related issue, the Alabama Department of Human Resources reports that it has 350,000 open child support cases. Approximately 143,000 of these cases probably involve professing Christians (350,000 x .41).

Forced Pastoral Exits

23 percent of all current pastors in the United States have been fired or forced to resign in the past.⁷

45 percent of the pastors who were fired in one denomination left the ministry altogether.⁸

34 percent of all pastors presently serve congregations that forced their previous pastor to resign.⁹

The seven primary reasons for forced exits all involve some form of conflict.¹⁰

The average pastoral career lasts only fourteen years—less than half of what it was not long ago.¹¹

1,500 pastors leave their assignments every month in the United States because of conflict, burnout, or moral failure.¹²

The direct cost of replacing a pastor is approximately 12 months of his salary.¹³

The average pastor's salary is \$38,000.¹⁴

Therefore, the direct cost of replacing pastors who have been forced out of ministry (usually because of conflict) in the U.S. is approximately \$684 million per year (1,500 x 12 x \$38,000).

Sexual Abuse

The financial cost of sexual abuse in U.S. churches totals in the billions of dollars. For example, Boston's Catholic archdiocese recently agreed to pay \$85 million to settle claims by 550 people.¹⁵ In November 2004, a California Diocese paid a \$100 million joint settlement.

Endnotes

1 Conference of State Court Admin's;

<http://www.citizen.org/congress/civjus/tort/articles.cfm?ID=568>

3 <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PageCategory.asp?CategoryID=8>

4 Carl S. Dudley, "Conflict: Synonym for Congregation."

http://www.fact.hartsem.edu/topfindings/topicalfindings_article3.htm)

5 <http://www.americanchurchlists.com>

6 George Barna, New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released March 31, 2008,

<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrowPreview&BarnaUpdateID=295>

7 John C. LaRue, "Forced Exits: A Too-Common Ministry Hazard," *Your Church*, Mar/Apr 1996, p. 72, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/cbg/features/report/6y2072.html>.

8 Charles Willis, "Forced Terminations of Pastors, Staff Leveling Off," http://www.lifeway.com/about_pr08011.asp.

9 John C. LaRue, Id.

10 John C. LaRue, Id.

11 George Barna, 1996 Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators

12 Focus on the Family, 1998

13 The direct cost of replacing a business professional (recruiting, travel, moving, development, etc.) is typically equivalent to 18 months salary. (See "The Retention Dilemma, Why Productive Workers Leave-Seven Suggestions for Keeping Them," Hay Group Working Paper, by Dawn Sherman, William Alper and Alan Wolfson, Hay Group, 2001. <http://www.worksourcepartners.com/customers/buscase.shtml>.) While churches usually do not incur all of the replacement costs a business does, they can experience even greater additional costs due to lost giving after a forced pastoral exit. For the purposes of this analysis, I have conservatively estimated the direct cost of replacing a pastor at 12 months salary.

14 <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/SubmitSearch.asp?Key=salary&Go=Go>

15 <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2003/09/10/MN303809.DTL>