



## MOVING THE NEEDLE

### INTERPERSONAL AND CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT

#### PART 2: A CASE STUDY—OAHU CHURCH OF CHRIST

November 2017

The following case study illustrates consequences of long untended conflict and dysfunction, and the various benefits that a sound intervention can bring to a community. Additionally, the case study can aid helpers and troubled congregations determine the span of time and range of costs for intervention, as well as scheduling, selecting an interim leadership team, and communicating to the congregation. Even though up close no two church consultations are alike, there are similar variables to consider in achieving a good and enduring outcome.

The foundation of any engagement is a flexible and orderly method that keeps the consultant focused on each piece of his or her work. I began conceptualizing the Transforming Crisis Method (TCM) for a graduate class assignment during my coursework at Lipscomb University's Institute for Conflict Management (2010–2013). The professor described the assignment, "If you received a phone call about a congregation in crisis, what would be your approach?" Our task was to lay out how we would determine the scope, write a letter of intent, detail our discovery procedures (records, interviews, and surveys), create assessment reports, and develop mediation processes, as well as to define other measures we would take.

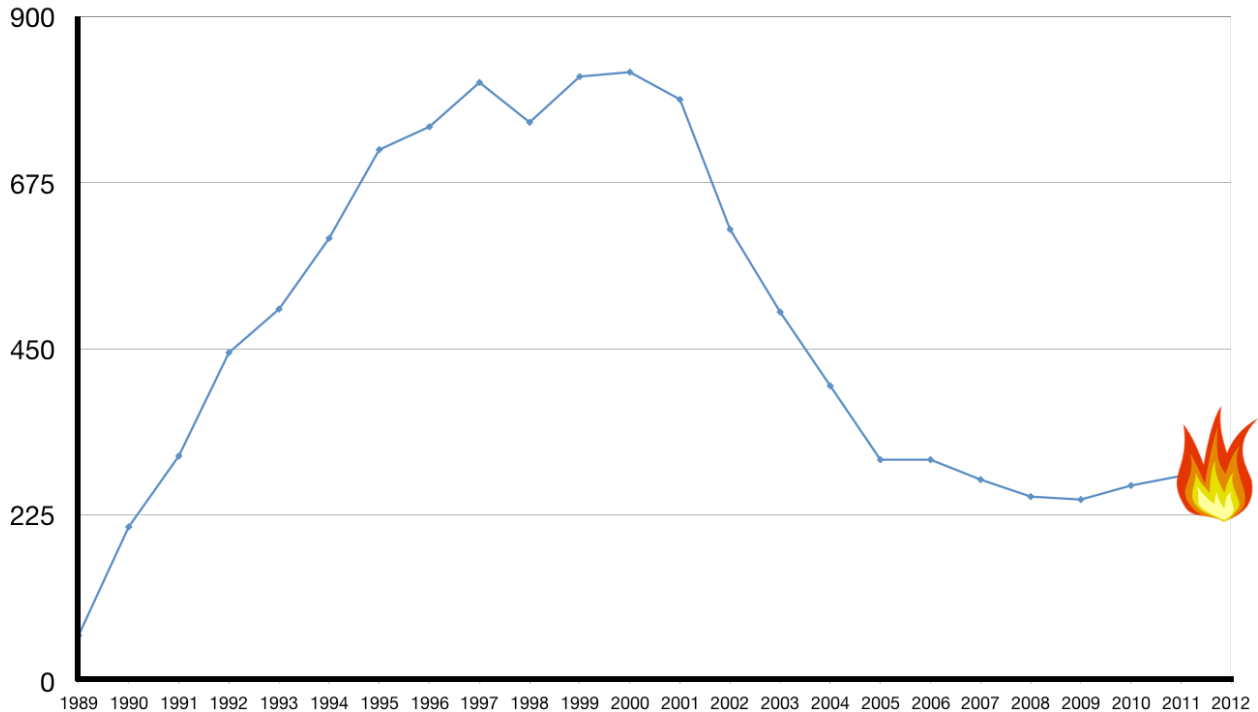
A phone call for help actually came halfway through the program as I was finishing a pivotal course, Apologies, Forgiveness and Reconciliation: "Steve, can you and Tricia go to Hawaii for the summer? Our church in Oahu is in a crisis." My acquaintance, "John,"<sup>1</sup> an evangelist in California, asked if he could set my name before the Oahu Church of Christ (OCC), and if my wife and I could go there for the summer.

Just before May 27, 2012, Memorial Day weekend, I took a nine-hour flight to Hawaii. The only thing I knew before I left was that there were strongly polarizing relationship problems among staff, a youth minister, and a few others. And I had learned that weeks earlier, their only elder, Art, had a stroke. Instead of bringing a plan, I wrote up an explanation of biblical principles that would be followed in the course of an engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> All names herein are first names only.

## The Membership Lifecycle of the Oahu Church of Christ



**Determining the Scope.** The moment I arrived I asked my driver, Tui, one of two evangelists of the congregation, some basic questions about the OCC. I learned on the drive between the airport and a Starbucks that the membership had peaked in 1998 during a leadership transition at approximately 850 members, but it had been in steep decline since then, plateauing in the mid-2000s.

Later that day I met with my original Los Angeles contact, John, and an elder, Al, also from Los Angeles, both tied to the congregation through mentoring roles. They filled me in on some of the staff dynamics and we sketched out how the first meetings would go. It was then that I learned that the call for help was largely related to the alleged threat that the youth leader was going to steer the youth into a rival church, part of the “Sold Out” movement. A firestorm soon followed, until elder and staff member Art, had a stroke. This gave some of the most conflicted parties pause and created an openness to outside help.

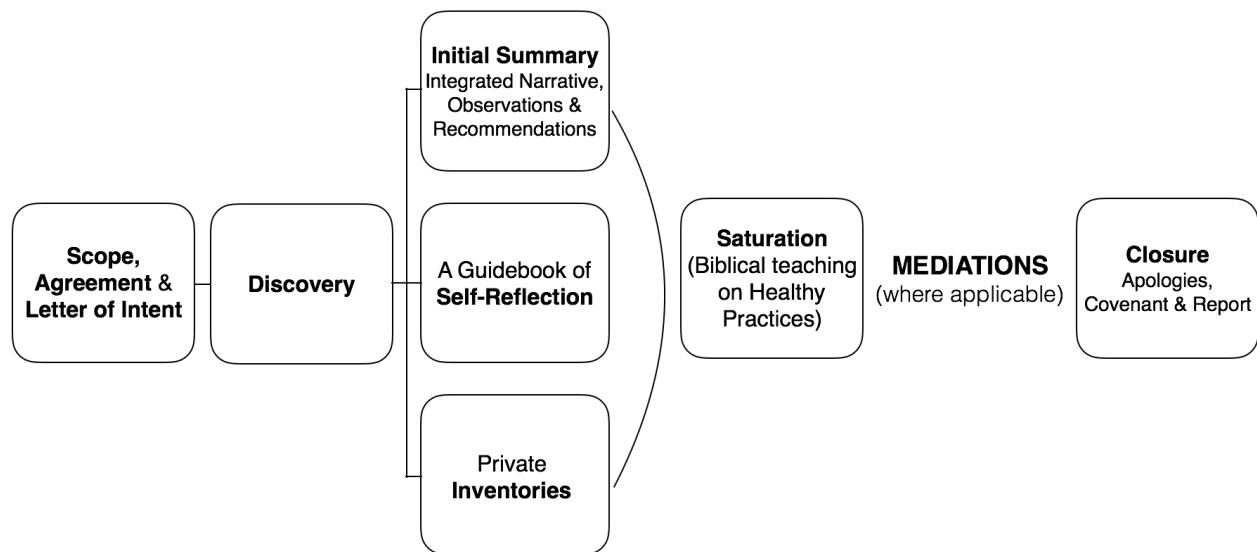
The plan was to meet on Monday and Tuesday evenings with two *ohana* (family) groups that were at odds with the leadership, one at a time. The first meeting was with the group led by Dale, the youth leader. As a complete outsider, I was initially poorly received by some members. I spoke for less than ten minutes before intense questions began coming my way. There were strong feelings that they did not want “someone coming from the mainland to reinforce the party line of the top staff.” I soon learned that I would be viewed as a *haole* (pronounced “how-lee”) until told otherwise. The term is used to describe a white person of foreign origin who has yet to earn the trust of the locals and natives.

On the second evening I was more successful in slipping in important comments before it turned into an open-exchange meeting: “I am not here on behalf of the local leadership or the ICOC. If invited in, my wife and I would be here on behalf of the entire congregation. And we would like to meet as many of you as possible.” I also reassured the twenty-five or so attendees that I knew no one on the island but had met their elder on one occasion, and that I planned to honor my craft by acting impartially. I also read Scriptures on impartiality and justice.

During the following days Al, John, and I had separate private meetings with individuals who requested to meet with us. A final group session was with the men of the board, staff, and ecclesiastical leaders, which included some but not all of the conflicted parties. It helped us determine the overall dynamics. This situation seemed very tenuous until, in a late private meeting with Dale and his wife, the youth leader said, “I choose to trust the process.” Looking back, his decision was a game-changer.

Both private and group discussions helped us size up the framework and scope of the engagement. I estimated that discovery, report generation, mediations, and other measures would take about two months.

### A BASIC CONSULTATION FLOW



**Letter of Intent.** I wrote a draft of the letter of intent on the return flight, but I did not make further flight reservations to Hawaii until John and Al approved it and we sent it to representatives of the OCC, made appropriate revisions, and received word of agreement from the board and the evangelists.

The final copy of the June 3 letter of intent was three pages, mostly laying the context for how the consultation proposal came about and outlining the responsibilities of the consultants and the members. In the letter, we also said that we would develop an interim transition leadership that would last through the summer. One statement summed up our purpose: “Our goal is well beyond the reconciliation of crucial relationships—it is helping the Oahu Church of Christ experience transformative healing, strengthening of the congregation, and rebuilding your spiritual confidence, using the Scriptures.”

The proposed outline for the summer was:

<b>STAGE</b>	<b>GOALS</b>
Discovery Period (June 10–29)	First Assessments
Individual Mediations (July 11–25)	Forgiveness & Reconciliation
Congregational Renewal (July 26–Aug. 13)	Healing & Refreshment
Congregational Workshop (Aug. 15)	A New Chapter

Even though it might become necessary later to deviate from directions proposed in the letter of intent, both the initial scope and the letter are necessary steps. I am reminded of the quote by Benjamin Franklin: “If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail!” The consultant needs an initial earnest plan to embark on the work. From my experience, congregations allow for changes from the original course when there is a just cause, and adjustments emerge out of the use of transparent, collaborative, and communicative processes.

**Touchdown (June 8).** My wife and I arrived on Friday, June 8. The consulting team was to be comprised of me, Tricia, and John and Al, the evangelist and elder from Los Angeles. John and Al would be involved remotely, from the mainland, and I and my wife would oversee the main aspects of the consultation.

**Discovery (June 10–29).** The first phase of TCM, Discovery, involves research, interviews, and surveys and requires a strong sense of curiosity. Developing timelines and mapping developments can be immensely helpful in explaining the present reality.

Tricia and I met with fifty parties within three weeks. We added more time for interviews than initially anticipated because islanders insist on being hospitable and conversing in conjunction with a meal. Within a few days we perceived significant recurring themes and patterns, and we knew that we could help.

Three things stuck out. First, at least one person from every appointment identified the same reason for the church’s initial downward spiral: an unpleasant change in leadership in 1998. Second, the problem that brought us to the island had little to do with why we were really there. There was no discernable plot or other danger of losing members to a rival church. And third, debates on methodology, principle, and philosophy had been unsolvable for many years because they were not addressing interpersonal issues and normalized sinful behaviors.

Within the first few weeks there were two deviations from the letter of intent. First, it was necessary for Al, one of the consultants, to pull out because of a family health matter. Second, nine days in to the engagement the lead minister, Rhys, suggested that he step down from his previous role and pursue a position in the mainland for further training, and that I formally assume the temporary role of lead minister. Rhys desired to stay for the summer in order that he could learn from me. We began the processes of identifying a Ministry Transition Team and for selecting a long-term minister.

**The Ministry Transition Team.** Due to the breakdown of trust toward the leadership, there needed to be a collaboration mechanism that would represent the church during the summer and possibly beyond. John came from the mainland, and over the course of three days, June 12–14, we developed an advisory group and a ministry transition team.

The Advisory Group included all parties of the conflict and all members in formal leadership roles—fourteen couples representing the staff, most board members, a youth leader, and one or two others. This sounding board was used to test ideas and reports before they went to the congregation, and as a result, it created good will and helped us observe the behaviors of the parties.

The Ministry Transition Team, which would determine the course of the congregation, was selected through a nomination process. There were seven couples identified by the Advisory Group according to criteria based on Acts 6:3 and 1 Timothy 3:8–13. (On other occasions, I have used an entire congregation to nominate the transition team.) Under my temporary leadership, the new team oversaw major decisions throughout the summer. Together, we developed the desired specifications for the next minister, shared them with the church for feedback, and began seeking candidates through word of mouth that might fit the criteria.

**The Assessment.** On July 15 I tested the “midstream” Initial Summary of Observations and Recommendations. There were a dozen historical developments that were factored into the disruptions and crisis of the Oahu Church of Christ, that resulted in nine impediments to progress and six relationships that required mediation. The final report would need time to ferment and to include the results of mediations. The assessment only went through small changes.



**A Ministry Transition Team is selected through a nomination process**

**Mediation and Alignment.** Next we moved into resolving longstanding conflicts. Unfortunately, most of the parties had previously scheduled to be on the mainland for vacation during the two-week period set aside for mediations. But fortunately, I was able to use most of that time to develop a *Preparing for Mediation* workbook, which I emailed to the parties, who studied it near the end of their trips.

The studies and exercises in the workbook proved to be immensely helpful. Matters that went back as far as six years were resolved within two meetings—largely because the parties took their preparation work seriously. They came in with a familiarity with metaphors, definitions, and goals. As a result, the workbook has become a regular part of our mediations.

The Lipscomb course, Apologies, Forgiveness and Reconciliation, was the basis for some of my public teaching and mediations. I saturated the church with Scriptures, stories, and insights on the subject of transformation.

Alignment refers to: 1) getting the right people in the right roles, insofar as possible, 2) helping parties become more self-aware through feedback, and 3) creating or improving the processes for managing future difficulties.

There was an eleven-day period that overlapped with the delayed mediations during which candidates Anthony and Saun Galang were interviewed and selected by a process that involved the entire congregation (July 20–31). It was advantageous that we were able to have them in place for the closing portion of our work.

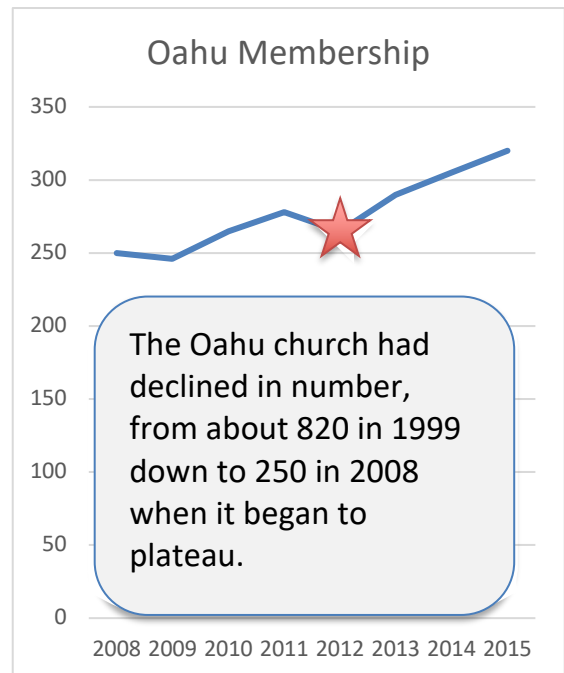
**Closure.** It was very important to inform the congregation of findings, outcomes of mediation involving the most prominent individuals, progress with the representation team on major developments, and items under the work-in-progress category.

The final midweek service of the engagement was somewhat of a summit, a disclosure of the results of the mediation and the findings of the consultation. The main parties were able to stand before the congregation and read a prepared statement. Some of the parties deviated from their script, going further with their lessons learned and apologies than expected. The final week we also presented the report, which noted unfinished business that would require follow-up, such as a revamp of board bylaws. By the end of that evening we knew that we were reaching our goal.

**Follow-Up/Return on Investment.** We returned to the island in August, 2013, for a one-year follow-up and in August, 2017 for a five-year follow-up. The congregational meetings had grown enough in the first year that they had moved to a larger facility. During the first return trip, we conducted a progress report, reviewing what had been done and things that still needed attention. The second trip focused on continued training and normal alignment issues.

The Oahu Church of Christ provides useful data because enough time has passed and records were kept that allowed the intervention to become an example of costs and savings of a properly led engagement.

- The cost of the nine-week intervention project was about \$44,000, including salary, travel, hotels, venues, car rentals, and food.
- Over the next year contributions increased by about \$2,700 per week, averaged over a year, translating to roughly sixteen weeks to cover the cost for the entire intervention. The contributions were up by \$4,500/week *at the end of the first year*.
- The departing minister, Rhys Kiaania, stated that if the measures had been taken back when the problems first appeared, “we would not have lost nearly 600 members,” and “our losses in regular and missions contributions were somewhere between \$600,000 and \$1,000,000.”
- Following the one-year review, the new minister, Anthony Galang, stated:



*From time to time churches need to hit the reset button. Oahu was in decline for many years, and Steve and Tricia Staten came in and did what was needed. Steve did the work of an elder, preparing the way so that Saun and I could hit the ground running. I believe that elders in our churches should get his training. We could not have had the success we are experiencing*

*without the work of clearing out the deep issues in the church. And in less than a year our membership has gone from about 263 to nearly 300, attendance from about 290 to an average of 420.*

The Oahu Church learned how to transform their conflict without losing a single member during the engagement and has grown from about 260 to the mid-300s. I don't know of an investment into a first-world congregation where dollar-to-soul saving, dollar-to-dollar increase in giving, and dollar-to-morale uplift can compare with the impact of the Oahu project.

Under the new leadership of Anthony and Saun Galang the Oahu Church of Christ was better set up to achieve fuller harmony and fulfill its greater destiny. Within three years of their arrival this increasingly resilient church and their evangelists put a missionary on the island of Maui and united two autonomous house churches on the Big Island. And today the church in Guam looks to the Oahu Church for training and guidance.

**STEPHEN F. STATEN**

*Organizational Health Consultant*

[www.bridginginternational.com](http://www.bridginginternational.com)

773-910-3777

## ESTIMATING CONSULTATION COSTS

		Estimated Costs	Comments
<b>Consultant #1</b> Individuals / Couples	Fees		
	Flights		
	Accommodations		
	Car Rental & Fuel		
	Meals		
<b>Consultant #2</b> Individuals / Couples	Fees		
	Flights		
	Accommodations		
	Car Rental & Fuel		
	Meals		
<b>Consultant #3</b> Individuals / Couples	Fees		
	Flights		
	Accommodations		
	Car Rental & Fuel		
	Meals		
<b>Other</b>	Special Venues		
	Miscellaneous 1		
	Miscellaneous 2		