We Don’t Talk About That Here

A culture of conflict avoidance in Fellowship Pacific

Dave Nannery
Associate Pastor at Squamish Baptist Church, Squamish, BC

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A rolling crisis has emerged in our national Fellowship, and in Fellowship Pacific in particular, concerning the issue of whether the pastoral/elder office should be reserved exclusively for qualified men (the complementarian position) or open to women as well (the egalitarian position).

In 1997, Fellowship National approved a position statement to address this issue:

> In Fellowship Baptist Churches the biblical office of Pastor/Elder/Overseer is for qualified men appointed by the local church to a teaching, governing ministry, thus shaping the doctrine and practice of the church.
>
> Churches are expected to call staff members “pastors” only when they qualify for the biblical office of pastor/elder/overseer.

Corresponding to this, Fellowship National’s bylaws require of its member churches that:

> The pastoral office in the church is reserved for qualified men recognized by the church for oversight of the doctrine and practice of the church. (4.1 (a) (iii))

In response, the churches of Fellowship Pacific (then FEBBC/Y) approved a policy statement in 2005 outlining how they would apply these national positions in a partial manner:

> We will apply the new National FEBCC bylaw regarding women and the pastoral office as follows:
>
> 1. the FEBBC/Y region only recognizes men as Senior Pastors.
>
> The implications of this policy include:

> 1. That the FEBBC/Y region will enforce the national bylaw to the extent that should a church call a woman to be senior pastor, the church will be put under discipline (see Bylaw 8)

This year, several churches within Fellowship Pacific brought forward a motion calling for all Fellowship Pacific churches to align fully with the Fellowship National position and bylaws on this matter. This motion was rejected at IMPACT 2025 by roughly 80% of delegates, after the Fellowship Pacific board appointed a panel of speakers to publicly condemn the motion. In particular, Regional Director David Horita argued that the 2005 Fellowship Pacific policy was approved by churches who, at the time, *fully intended it to permit women to hold office as pastors/elders*. In response to those who disagreed with this interpretation of the policy, he said that "they were not there" in 2005, for the most part. The Fellowship Pacific board characterized the 2025 motion as a divisive attempt to resurrect a matter already resolved. (Perhaps others may disagree with David that his interpretation of the policy was the original intent, but Fellowship Pacific has been *functioning* for the last 20 years as though it were, so for my purposes here the point is moot.)

David's "they were not there" criticism does apply to me: I wasn't there in 2005. The first IMPACT conference I attended was in 2011. Apart from a two-year gap, however, I have served as a member or pastor in two Fellowship Pacific churches since 2011, and I have attended every IMPACT since 2016. I have participated in New Pastor Orientation, EQ Bootcamp, and shared numerous conversations with Fellowship leaders, many of whom I count not only as brothers and sisters, but as friends.

Out of this 14-year involvement in Fellowship Pacific, I offer this concern: our current crisis is downstream from a deeper cultural problem. Only recently have I been able to put my uneasiness about this into words:

- I believe our present crisis has developed because of a *conflict-avoidant* approach to discussing genuine and significant divisions among ourselves, specifically second-order issues of church polity.
- I believe that Fellowship Pacific is beset with a conflict-avoidant culture, and that this cultural problem leaves it vulnerable to the eventual introduction of heterodox and even heretical doctrines and practices.

- I believe that Fellowship Pacific, and Fellowship National, will be unable to resolve the present crisis in a wise and godly manner without addressing the deeper cultural problem that is upstream from this crisis.

An illustration of conflict avoidance

What do I mean by a conflict-avoidant culture? The 2005 policy decision approved by Fellowship Pacific serves as an illustration.

I don't have the inner details of how this policy was developed, and the conversations that were held around it. All I have is the final product, and the minutes of the 2005 conference that produced it. But assuming that the policy was intentionally designed to permit women to serve as pastors/elders, then the final product of their efforts is an unmistakable act of *avoidance*. It promises to "apply" and "enforce" the national bylaw to "Senior Pastors" only, rather than fulfilling the full wording of the bylaw. It's an attempt to heed the bylaws of Fellowship National only just enough to keep all parties (in Pacific and National) from being too upset.

Of course, this policy implementation creates quite an idiosyncrasy. At IMPACT 2025, Darcy Van Horn rightly noted that this policy functionally creates a unique "Senior Pastor" office, reserved for men alone, while allowing other pastor/elder roles to be held by women, though not *officially* sanctioned by Fellowship Pacific. (Unofficially, they have been welcomed and even platformed at IMPACT.) Darcy was also correct that there is no exegetical or theological basis for distinguishing the Senior Pastor as a unique office with unique gender qualifications. This is something that both complementarians and egalitarians ought to agree on. The Bible doesn't teach this, and such a policy functionally undermines our Affirmation of Faith which teaches that there are two offices of the church, elders and deacons.

Our present policy pleases neither side. For complementarians, it affirms that individuals who are unqualified for the office of elder may be appointed as elders; for egalitarians, it leaves a "glass ceiling" in place for women since they are denied the office of Senior Pastor. Both sides ought to grieve such a policy "solution." As a temporary measure to buy time for a real solution, it is adequate. As a permanent solution itself, it is nothing to be proud of.

In summary, there is no exegetical or theological basis for any of this. It is a political compromise, a pragmatic workaround to keep Fellowship Pacific sewn together. Of course, one may concede the point that it is a jerry-rigged policy, and then claim it is in the service of the noble aim of *unity*. I do believe that compromise, pragmatism, and politics are appropriate at times; I do not intend them as slurs. However, I will argue later that this doctrinal matter is not one of those times. The result of the 2005 decision is that Fellowship Pacific has been operating with an eccentric policy that both complementarians and egalitarians ought to agree is wrong.

This political compromise arising out of the 2005 policy was intended to resolve the issue, to keep the peace in Fellowship Pacific. But saying "the matter is closed" does not actually close the matter. If there are cracks in the wall of your house, covering them with wallpaper does not repair the cracks. They remain hidden underneath, where they can only grow larger. That is why, 20 years later, the cracks have asserted themselves. The only surprise is that it took so long. By its very nature, Fellowship Pacific's present policy *did not close* the division among us, but only papered over it. And now if we declare the matter resolved by the vote at IMPACT 2025, or by a similar vote at the Fellowship National conference, we have created the same fantasy as before. A fiat declaration of closure is only a new layer of wallpaper, plastered overtop the old one. Yet another repetition of *we don't talk about that here*.

These are the hallmarks of a conflict-avoidant system of relationships.

Conflict-avoidant family systems

Conflict-avoidant relationship systems are most commonly seen in families, but they can develop in any human institution—workplaces, clubs, churches, and so on.

At the core of a conflict-avoidant system is fear. Fear that conflict may shatter the unity and togetherness of the family. Fear of shame, rejection, and abandonment. To avoid these terrible emotions and experiences, family members establish a false peace to ensure that significant conflict never surfaces. If a serious division or dispute arises, it is dismissed, swept under the rug, wallpapered over. If a family member insists an issue must be faced, the family marshals its defences:

the dissenter is vilified as a troublemaker, a problem child, divisive, etc. Often the family member raises a concern in an imperfect way, and the family seizes on his or her missteps to condemn the dissenter and reaffirm its own wisdom in suppressing the issue. The avoidant family will take strong action when its patterns of avoidance are threatened, and it will feel wise and righteous in doing so.

A conflict-avoidant family system is controlled by fear because its confidence comes from its sense of togetherness. We are afraid that if we cannot "keep the family together" with our policies of superficial peace, then we will be rejected, abandoned, alone, and powerless. Shattered confidence is a terrible thing, and the members of a conflict-avoidant family will do almost anything not to feel it. So *we don't talk about that here*.

Enslaved by this fear, the "family" system embraces short-term "peace" at the expense of long-term family health. A father blows up at his kids, and the family pretends it never happened—but the children grow up hurting. A talented employee disregards workplace rules, and the boss does nothing—but resentment grows in the workplace. Eventually, the system reaches a crisis level. A member of the system can no longer abide the false peace. He or she demands the problems be brought into the open and dealt with. At this point, *the family leadership has forfeited the initiative it ought to have taken to guide the family through conflict*. Caught off-balance, it quickly reacts—and its reaction is anxious, defensive, and heavy-handed. Family leadership typically overplays its hand in shutting down the disruption. It blames and punishes the "divisive" member for the crisis, when the genesis of the problem actually lies in the spiritual and emotional immaturity of the family system.

This is the general pattern of avoidant relationship systems. I believe it describes part of what we see in Fellowship Pacific. I do think there is much good in Fellowship Pacific, and there is much good God will continue to do through us, because he is good and gracious, and he loves us dearly. But I believe we are hindering the Spirit's work through our patterns of relational and doctrinal avoidance. Our immaturity and avoidance come at a cost, and we are paying that cost now. Unless we change course, we will continue to pay it—no matter how often we tell ourselves that "the matter is resolved."

The avoidant system at IMPACT 2025

Let's consider how this played out at IMPACT 2025. Ten churches, including my own, tabled a motion that would require Fellowship Pacific churches to have a male-only eldership. One of the chief criticisms against these ten churches was that they did not approach any egalitarian churches first and engage them in one-on-one dialogue. This expectation stems from a Code of Conduct that was never approved by Fellowship Pacific churches, yet was cited by the Fellowship Pacific board as a standard of expected behaviour. New West Community Church was suspended in part for violating this "rule." (Whether the outcome would have been different had church-to-church dialogue happened first is doubtful, to say the least.)

The assumption behind this criticism appears to be that if a church does not engage other pastors and churches in individual dialogue first, then a spirit of division must be present. I cannot say whether such dialogue would have been wiser or more fruitful. But I am convinced the reason the dissenting pastors approached the Fellowship Pacific and National boards first is because they instinctively sensed that *the deeper problem was upstream*. Upstream is a system-wide culture of conflict avoidance that has wallpapered over the division between egalitarians and complementarians. By appealing to the Fellowship Pacific and National boards first, these churches are asking the boards to take the initiative in leading us to a conclusion on this conflict. When this appeal did not win over the Fellowship Pacific board, they brought forward the motion at IMPACT 2025 to appeal to the assembly of churches—the final authority in our region. The decision of the Fellowship Pacific board, and then the assembly itself, was to sustain the policy, and therefore to maintain our pattern of relational and doctrinal avoidance in this matter.

To shut down this disruption, the Fellowship Pacific board used a variety of political tactics: interrogating the procedural validity of the signing churches prior to IMPACT, publicly tarring the churches' approval of the motion as irregular, allocating its own representatives 40 minutes uninterrupted to argue against the motion and vilify it, and assembling enough delegates to ensure the motion was spoken against and defeated overwhelmingly. I do not know whether Paul Park's immediate and subsequent motion—directing the board to follow up with the ten churches about whether they can "joyfully fellowship" under this outcome—was

orchestrated by the board, but it certainly hammered home the point: *we don't talk about that here*.

As for the arguments against the motion, I sat as an observer as the board's representatives and other delegates spoke. I am typically a "slow cooker"; it usually takes me a while to recognize flaws in an argument. Yet even as I took notes, I was astonished at how transparently flawed the arguments against the motion were. Individually, they were nearly all tenuous, and full of more heat than light. Collectively, they flooded the room with a drumbeat of condemnation: *divisive, divisive, divisive*. In this, there was plenty of *pathos* and very little *logos*. There is a purpose in arguing this way: it is not an earnest dialogue but a rhetorical and political tactic used to rally the troops and defend the family system from disruption. The meeting was not a debate but a burial. The family system put the final nail in the coffin: *we don't talk about that here*.

This is the way a conflict-avoidant family system deals with disruption from any members who are weary of its superficial peace. It's a tragedy to me, because some of the men and women on the floor speaking against the motion are good people whom I have spoken with and been blessed by. Yet, immersed and locked into a conflict-avoidant system, they were unconvinced that doctrinal differences such as this *are* cracks in the wall that divide our Fellowship.

Why do these doctrinal differences divide us?

But these doctrinal differences necessarily divide us. To be Baptist requires us to understand where and when division in our fellowships ought to take place, and how to pursue it in a way that honours Jesus Christ and one another. So we divide ourselves from paedobaptists, and from denominations who feature presbyterian and episcopalian governance, and from any state church. And we ought to do so while deeply loving our brothers and sisters who differ from us. Ideally, our Baptist distinctives divide us from other Christians without necessitating animosity within the kingdom of God.

Two of the most helpful works to this end are Al Mohler's article A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity and Gavin Ortlund's book Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage. Both Mohler and Ortlund

use the concept of “theological triage” to help Christians navigate doctrinal differences. Broadly speaking, they outline:

- First-order issues that decide between orthodoxy and heresy.
- Second-order issues that hinder fellowship among believers.
- Third-order issues that are important but do not hinder fellowship.

As Baptists, we would join with Mohler and Ortlund in agreeing that baptism and church governance are second-order issues. And both of these authors argue that gender roles in eldership are also a second-order issue. Why? Because it hinders fellowship among churches in very practical ways relating to church governance. How can a complementarian church recognize and affirm another church’s elders when they are manifestly “unqualified” for the office? How can an egalitarian church accommodate the “misogyny” of complementarian practice? The only way to do this is through avoidance of the issue—*we don’t talk about that here*. When a woman stands on stage at IMPACT and identifies herself as a pastor, the only way to stay “united” is for all the complementarians to pretend they didn’t hear that. And I would expect that, behind the scenes, egalitarians will exert pressure at the church and seminary level to steer people toward the enlightened egalitarian position. All this tension lies under the surface, beneath our smiles and handshakes and cheerful conversations. And so a culture of conflict avoidance is cultivated because it is *required*—and that is a dangerous thing. A culture of conflict avoidance is the consequence we receive when we pretend a second-order issue is a third-order issue. And immersed in the avoidant culture, we have become so accustomed to the tension that many of us don’t even notice or feel it anymore. It just feels normal, and we insist the culture is healthy. If you want to know whether water is wet, the last creature you ought to ask is a fish.

This is why second-order issues require us to build low fences, and shake hands often over them. *When we fail to build fences, we cultivate avoidance.* Better to recognize division for what it is, and affirm the magnitude of our differences, and shake hands over a low fence, than to pretend these differences aren’t a big deal. Better an honest division than the “unity” and false peace of a conflict-avoidant relational system.

How does this happen? How do otherwise good and reasonable brothers and sisters in Christ fall into the trap of a conflict-avoidant family system?

Why are we so avoidant?

What I will write next is not a judgment of any one individual in Fellowship Pacific. It may be entirely untrue of many leaders, and only partly true of others. I don't know the hearts of everyone in our Fellowship; all I can see and sense is the larger cultural pattern.

Consider the often-repeated mission and identity statement of Fellowship Pacific, featured on the front page of our website:

> **we are a group of 100+ churches and organizations that are leveraging our collective strength in order to produce a God-honouring impact**

"Leveraging our collective strength in order to produce a God-honouring impact" is a mouthful. Translated from Corporatese into English, it roughly means: *getting the gang together to achieve big things for God*.

This is not a bad thing to want. It's a good thing! We should all want this! My concern is not the statement itself. My concern is that, for many of us, this is not a *mission statement* but a *confidence statement*. For many of us, we are *needy* for togetherness because we are *needy* to achieve big things for God.

Consider the latest Fellowship Pacific tagline:

Again, these are good things! But here the language is simpler and more stark. We want to move “forward” boldly. We need to be “never alone” so we can sustain this confidence.

There may be, for many of us, a *neediness* for togetherness and a *neediness* for a sense of achievement. The first supports the second; if the *togetherness* of the family system is compromised, then so is our ability to affirm and support the big things each of us is achieving for God. The family’s confidence comes from its unity and achievements—and if the only way to preserve the unity is through the politics of false peace, then so be it.

If this is, for many of us, a confidence statement, then it is what the apostle Paul calls a *boast*. Our confidence, our boast comes from our collective strength. Our confidence, our boast is in our God-honouring impact. The confidence is in ourselves (collectively) and in what we do, more so than it is in Jesus Christ. So we are *needy* for these things that are our confidence (John 5:44; Eph 2:9). Oh how different it is when our confidence comes from who God is and what he has done!

> But for me it is good to be near God;
> I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,
> that I may tell of all your works.
> Psalm 73:28

It’s so difficult to untangle such a false confidence in ourselves and our own works from a legitimate love of good things. Consider the tangle this creates at IMPACT. We gather together and hear one another’s reports and video promos and TED-style talks about the exciting things that are happening in our churches. At first this can only seem good—but is it sometimes our confidence and boast? We celebrate the growth statistics in our Fellowship (especially when Mark Clark was massively escalating them). These are a cause of praise to God, but do they also serve as a boast for us? And then, on the final morning of IMPACT, we hold a “Communion” service together. No matter that this undermines our Affirmation of Faith concerning the ordinances of the local church—this is a ritual extracted from the church and adapted to our own ends, *useful* to reinforce our confidence in our *togetherness*, without thought to what the scriptures affirm about its proper place as an ordinance. No doubt these things feel amazing, inspiring, and moving. That is why we do them. They fill us with confidence.

But if “our collective strength” and our “God-honouring impact” have become our confidence and our boast, then the loss of these things will feel like an existential threat. And the family system is attuned to shut down any such threat. Any attempt to pursue *genuine* peace and *genuine* closure to the question of female eldership *will* be attacked and vilified. Either it will be kept off the floor of IMPACT, or it will only be permitted once its death has been arranged. Real peace, real resolution on this issue cannot be pursued—until the day when egalitarians gain the majority and complementarians let them have their way. In the meantime, closure will not be permitted, because it would require the division of Fellowship Pacific, and our boast in our togetherness and our achievements would be shattered. So *we don’t talk about that here*.

Future outcomes

What happens to Christian denominations and fellowships characterized by avoidant patterns when it comes to doctrine? What follows not a prophecy. It’s an assessment of what makes these systems vulnerable—and if even I can see this, then Satan has seen it far longer. We can expect him to exploit our weaknesses.

In time, we can expect bad actors to take advantage of a conflict-avoidant relational system. We can expect them to use the opportunity to introduce and cultivate doctrines that are genuinely heterodox or heretical, or practices that are aberrant. Of course, some members of the system will resist—usually the cantankerous conservatives who irritate others and are known to cause a fuss. They will try to urge their colleagues to take a stand against the bad actors. But their colleagues will be reluctant to do so. They will hear charges that these dissenters are being “divisive.” That the denomination or fellowship will lose its “unity” and all the good things it’s doing for God. So they will remain silent, or even join the majority in shutting down the disruption. They have been trained by long immersion in the culture of the conflict-avoidant system. (As an example, consider the Downgrade Controversy, in which Charles Spurgeon was vilified for being “divisive” and disrupting the “unity” of the Baptist Union when he warned against first-order doctrinal error.)

Eventually, the “divisive” conservative members will feel ostracized and frustrated. They give up and withdraw from the fellowship (as Spurgeon did), and form their own. This departure only increases the influence of the bad actors who remain. As

their voices grow more prominent, more familiar, and more influential, they soon win over enough support to elevate their own leaders to power and make their own policies official. The family system has finally achieved real closure—in favour of the bad actors.

My hope and prayer is that this will never be the future of Fellowship Pacific or Fellowship National. At present, thank God, there are no such bad actors in the system promoting heresy within our system. I do believe that our *current* leaders would resist such bad actors. But how can I have confidence that the next generation of leaders—raised and trained in a culture of conflict avoidance—will hold fast to the truth in the face of accusations that they are being "divisive"? Against the marshalled power and politics of a conflict-avoidant relational system, our newly revised Affirmation of Faith is only so much tissue paper.

As for our present crisis in Fellowship Pacific, keep in mind that the present political compromise is by its very nature temporary. A political compromise is a *ceasefire*, not a peace treaty. It ends when the status quo changes. If egalitarians gain enough support within Fellowship Pacific and Fellowship National, there is no doubt that they will make a move to adopt a policy of full egalitarianism, including the role of "Senior Pastor." (I certainly would if I shared their ecclesiology!) Such a move will be hailed as "unifying" rather than divisive. It will be welcomed as an embodiment of our values of togetherness and achievement, in which we find our confidence and boast. Before and after that day, I expect egalitarians will work behind the scenes to normalize their own practices, to elevate their own leaders, and to sideline complementarians from positions of influence. (Except, perhaps, complementarians who remain quiet, and a little embarrassed, about being complementarian.) I do not think of these as sinister behaviours at all—they are only natural to man as a political creature operating under conditions of false peace.

If Fellowship Pacific continues to sustain the ceasefire, while some of its egalitarians work behind the scenes to change the status quo, then Fellowship National will have to make a choice: either accommodate the drift, or continue its own pattern of avoidance as well. For the last 20 years, Fellowship National has taken no action regarding Fellowship Pacific's inconsistent implementation of its 2005 policy. If nothing has been done in the last 20 years, can we expect to find any resolve to do something later, when it is even more difficult? "If they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

Of course, accommodation would not by itself be the end of the world. Egalitarianism is not heretical, or even heterodox. It is a doctrinal position within the bounds of orthodoxy—though I believe it is badly mistaken and will further warp the hermeneutics and polity of the local church, already warped far too much by North American culture. My concern is deeper: I believe that Fellowship Pacific's efforts to appease egalitarians and "keep the gang together" have fostered a culture of conflict avoidance in our family system. I think we have made ourselves deeply vulnerable to future bad actors who will find in Fellowship Pacific—and even Fellowship National—a culture ripe for exploitation.

Perhaps God will have mercy on us and spare our Fellowship from this fate that has befallen many denominations and fellowships before us. (And we are certainly not wiser than they were!) Yet we would do well to stop avoiding these problems as we have done for 20 years. We can learn how to "take the bull by the horns" and engage necessary conflict in a gracious way, in the face of all the painful feelings it brings, and pursue a genuine conclusion to this matter. We should intervene proactively now, if the Lord permits. There will not be a better opportunity later.

A final word

What I've written here was originally a summary of my own thoughts and concerns, not a public polemic. I feel it is inadequate for the task, but I am sharing it because other pastors have said it described the problems that they have felt too, and so I think it would be helpful for all Fellowship churches to consider before our National Conference next month, as we make important decisions together on this doctrinal matter. After all, I find it likely that this culture of conflict avoidance is present in other regions of our Fellowship, and we ought to consider whether we are all complicit in it. But there was no way to write this essay without singling out Fellowship Pacific as a region, since that is where my experience has been. That is my biggest grief in writing it, because regardless of all I have said, the Lord *is* working in effective ways through our churches in the Pacific region, and I am grateful for it. He has done great things for us.

I do hope that whoever reads this understands that I am writing with a heart of sorrow and not contempt. My grief is felt most keenly where my words are the most pointed. These are my brothers and sisters I am writing about, and many of

them have shown kindness to me. I have intentionally limited the naming of individuals or groups; I do not blame the Fellowship Pacific board, or head office, or any particular individual for this cultural problem. I am saying that the problem is not *them*, the problem is *us*—all of us, including me. This is the first time I have spoken about this subject outside of private conversations; so if our Fellowship is to be blamed for our culture of conflict avoidance, let me be the first to receive the blame. May God protect us from our own weaknesses and errors, and from any false confidence in man.

Let's no longer get the gospel backward. Our confidence is not meant to come from our unity; our unity is meant to come from our confidence in Jesus Christ and his Word. Our confidence is not meant to come from our achievements, but our achievements come from our Spirit-led confidence in what Christ has achieved for us. "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1 Cor 1:31). From now on, let that be the confidence and mission of our Fellowship.

Dave Nannery *serves as an Associate Pastor at Squamish Baptist Church, where he*
leads the biblical soul care ministry as a counsellor. He loves coming alongside people burdened with sin, suffering, and shame—helping them see how God's Word speaks with grace and clarity to every part of life.

Dave holds a Master of Divinity from Faith Bible Seminary and has completed graduate-level training through the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation. He is certified with the Association of Biblical Counselors and is passionate about guiding people toward hope and healing in Christ.