

Reflections on journeying with congregations through conflict and change

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It has been my privilege to work as a mediator for the past twenty years, and while my vocation began in a secular context, for the past fifteen years my primary focus has been accompanying churches and their leaders as they experience conflict and change. Yes, this work can be hard. It is also tremendously rewarding. I have had the privilege of working with churches of many different denominations, and contrary to what some may believe, no denomination has a corner on conflict: we all fall on hard times when the way out seems dim and blurry at best.

I could regale you with stories of the odd things churches fight about (such as where the minister stored the communion cups) or of the awful things people do to each other (such as the minister who threatened to resign if the church didn't kick out certain people) or of the beauty of the human spirit in times of resolution (such as the time when at the end of a mediation, people began embracing one another, and I quietly slipped out of the room).

But I have not been asked to tell you about these things. Instead, I have been asked to write about what I have learned as a mediator, especially as it relates to churches in conflict. Here's my list of learnings: (1) Our theology matters. (2) Our personal journeys of transformation matter more—way more. (3) Our corporate journey of transformation also matters. With regard to congregational transformation I offer the following counsel to leaders: (a) Attend to the spiritual and emotional health of your leadership. (b) Learn to move beyond artificial harmony. (c) Redevelop the skill of listening for the leading of God's Spirit among you.

Our theology matters

Some months ago, I mentioned to a New Testament scholar the idea that when it comes to people's behaviour at church, our

theology matters, and he almost fell out of his chair. “I hope it matters,” he said, “or my work has been in vain!” I am embarrassed to admit that as it relates to conflict, this realization came as a bit of a surprise to me. While all denominations have conflict, how we fight—and to some degree, even what we fight over—differs from one group to the next. It appears that what we believe actually makes a difference in how we behave when we are disputing.¹

This should comfort us—and it should give us pause. I have found (for example) that all things considered, Mennonites can be relatively kind when they fight. This does not mean that we do not say hurtful things. We do! We are often deeply misguided in our attempts to work toward resolution with one another. But given the breadth and depth of conflicts I’ve seen, I find myself surprised by the bits of grace or restraint Mennonites are able to

display now and then in hard times. Has our peace theology helped us after all? Or is it our theology of discipleship that has helped us in this way?

In my experience, the most critical factor in a conflict resolution process is the attention the individuals involved give to their fidelity to their faith commitments—fidelity that is premised on their ongoing journey of transformation.

Our personal journeys of transformation matter even more

Our peace theology is important, but when it comes to conflict I am intrigued more and more by the impact of our discipleship practice. In fact, these two are not that different from each other; they are two sides of the same coin and they must be held together. Peace theology declares the stan-

dard by which we believe God has called us to live; discipleship places our feet on the path that (we hope) leads us in this direction. Discipleship is about our fidelity to actually living as followers of Jesus, to incarnating peace theology as a part of our daily practice.

It has been my experience that the most critical factor in any conflict resolution process is the attention the individuals involved give to their fidelity to their faith commitments—fidelity that is premised on their ongoing journey of transformation. As Christians, we sometimes forget that conversion was not intended

to be a one-time event. Through every event and encounter of every day, whether it is observing a sunset, buying groceries, or engaging in conflict, we are invited deeper and deeper into God's love, and by virtue of this love into ever more profound depths of transformation. What this means practically is that conflict, in its own challenging and sometimes awful way, is a gift, as hard as that sometimes is to grasp. Conflict is an invitation to learn more about ourselves and to be awakened again to our own path toward reflecting more fully our identity as children of God.

Recently, I was speaking with some people who had emerged with emotional wounds from a painful conflict in their church. As they prepared to meet the members of the congregation on the other side of this dispute, they asked themselves again and again: "What have I contributed to this situation? How did I invite this dispute to occur? How did my actions trigger reactions in the people with whom we fought? For what do I need to apologize? How do I live the forgiveness God has asked me to offer? How do I love these people?" Just as importantly, they asked: "How do I tell my story of pain honestly, yet in a way that others can hear?" When people in our congregations ask themselves these questions, they are not only putting their peace theology into discipleship practice, they are also allowing the experience of conflict to transform them into reflecting ever more fully the image of God.

Our corporate journey of transformation also matters

While legitimate, painful, and hard realities lie behind deep congregational conflicts, one of the biggest gifts congregations can give themselves is a reminder that healing can come—but to get there, the church must gently, graciously, and courageously engage in a corporate journey of transformation. Healing after conflict requires time and tremendous patience. It typically includes hard conversations. It may also include reconsideration of the congregational culture and of how the congregation functions organizationally. While none of this assessment is easy, it can result in profound learning and growth, even grace. For our purposes here, I offer the following counsel for the consideration of congregational leaders:

Attend to the spiritual and emotional health of your leadership. Much has been said about leadership in recent years. Should

we be training shepherd leaders, chaplain leaders, vision-casters, motivational leaders? These are worthy questions, but when it comes to conflict they distract from a deeper and more important leadership issue. Leaders (lay and paid): How spiritually and emotionally mature are you? How have you attended to your anxieties, your fears, your ego needs? How do you get hooked by the anxieties of people in your congregation? What has your own journey of transformation been like? What are your spiritual practices and how are you nurturing them? Do you love the people you are leading?

Leadership matters. A lot. A former CEO of a large company has observed that “the success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener.”² For our context, we might translate this as follows: *The success of a congregation depends on the interior condition of its leaders.* This is *not* to say that leaders are to blame for all the conflicts churches fall into. It does suggest, however, that the emotional and spiritual health of a congregation’s leaders will *significantly* influence a congregation’s capacity to navigate conflict.

Learn to move beyond artificial harmony.³ Years ago, a friend told me: “At our church, we like to act as though everything is okay. And then at congregational meetings [or in the parking lot], it’s all guns.” Sometimes our peace theology helps us. Sometimes it kills us. Often church people tell me they can’t be honest with one another because to be Christian is to be nice. The problem is that nice only lasts for so long. When we neglect real concerns and issues, people typically respond in one of three ways: some wear a mask of contentment, some explode, others leave.

Sadly, somewhere along the way, many of our churches came to the conclusion that to disagree is to sin. This notion seems to have left us with two choices: either avoid disagreement at all costs, or when that doesn’t work, fight hard until at least one side is hurt. It doesn’t need to be this way. Not only is there a third way; it is in pursuing this third way that we will encounter the Holy Spirit.

Much can be said about the nature of this alternative course, but when it comes to conflict within the Christian community, this third way has several key characteristics: (1) The people involved are able to speak honestly, even passionately, about

their perspective, yet as they speak, they are kind and gracious to those with whom they disagree. (2) People listen, listen, and listen some more to each other, holding their own perspectives with humility in order to learn from the perspectives of the other. (3) All involved listen deeply for the leading of God's Spirit—with regard to the issue and with regard to what this conflict might be teaching those involved about themselves. This last item leads us directly to the next major theme.

Redevelop the skill of listening for the leading of God's Spirit among you. I am grateful that the Mennonite churches I visit know what I mean when I ask them to listen for God's leading. That said, most of these same congregations tell me they have no idea how to do this, either personally or collectively. The implications here are profound. Without the discipline of listening for God's leading, we reduce our dialogue to a battle of opinions rooted in our own perspectives about the situation at hand.

I am aware that the notion that we might be able to discover the heart of God is fraught with challenges. How do we know we

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are on track? How do we know when it is God's wisdom we are hearing? What role does scripture and biblical scholarship play in our listening? These are important questions. Too often, though, we have allowed these questions to become an insurmountable barrier, and in frustration we give up on the task altogether. Or we seek to answer these questions using only the same resources—our own opinions—that created the problem in the first place.

Listening for God's leading involves relearning practices of prayer—especially listening prayer that allows us to become still in God's presence. From this restful and reflective space, we are invited to release our attachments to our own opinions in order that we might hear God's voice rather than our own.

It is of course possible that two or more people or groups will hear God differently on the same issue. In fact, we may now have two conflicts, the original one and the one that emerged when we sought God and discovered that we heard God differently from

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one another! It is possible that one of us hasn't listened well, though it is just as possible that neither of us has listened well or that God is calling us in different directions. More commonly though it is that God is still working with each of us, inviting us to continue listening for God's leading together.

It is worth noticing that when we take on the discipline of genuinely seeking God, the ego falls away and a deep humility begins to emerge. Why? Listening for God's leading places us in the heart of God, and when we are there, we discover—we remember—that each of us belongs to God, and that despite our differences each of us is held in God's loving embrace. Even if our conflict causes us to part ways (and sometimes it does), we part well when we do so knowing in our bones that each of us is held in the heart of God.

A word about our context

Our twenty-first century North American context has added complexity to congregational life and to our conflicts. Many churches are in steep decline, and recent research has shown that the number of youth born into the church (whether evangelical or mainline) who leave the church is well over 50 percent.⁴ It is easy to target each other and to blame those in leadership for this decline. Sadly, this adds conflict and stress to an already high-stress situation. Like the children of Israel, we are in a wilderness—kicked out of our Egypt and not yet near our promised land. It is encouraging to remember that the Israelites left Egypt as a ragtag group of slaves and entered the Promised Land as children of God. Of course, this transformation did not happen overnight! It took forty years to make the journey, with much heartache and petty squabbling along the way. According to the Exodus story, the Israelites could have entered the Promised Land a lot sooner had they been ready. Instead it took forty years for the people to yield themselves to the new identity to which they were being called.

Like God's people long ago, we too are being called into a new identity. Perhaps we do not yet have a name for it, but this shift

we are in represents an invitation to recognize ourselves more fully as children of God, with all that this implies. The journey of transformation is not easy and is bound to involve conflicts—some of them petty and distracting, others significant and germane to the very transformation we are undergoing. How many years we will remain in the wilderness will depend on how we address the questions implicit in the list offered above. How are we listening for God’s Spirit, especially in our disagreements? How are we being shaped by our encounters with God? How are we attending to our spiritual and emotional health? How are we engaging each other, and how does this engagement reflect God’s presence in our lives?

And one more question: How are we noticing the presence of God’s joy and hope among us? After all, even when we cannot see them, God’s joy and hope are always in our midst, calling out to us, awaiting us, inviting us again and again to drink from God’s life-giving streams. May each of us be renewed by this water of life.

“How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light” (Ps. 36.7–9; NRSV).

Notes

¹ It is worth noting here that what matters is not what we say we believe but what we really believe in the depths of our being. Many people say they believe in a loving God, but the God they worship in their quieter and more honest moments is somewhat different.

² William O’Brien, former CEO of Hanover Insurance Company; quoted in Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Learning from the Future as It Emerges : The Social Technology of Presencing* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009), 7.

³ I have borrowed the term “artificial harmony” from Patrick Lencioni, *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012).

⁴ See a report of a recent Canadian study at <http://hemorrhagingfaith.com>.

About the author

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