

Through conflict to authentic community Reconciliation in the congregation

Nan Cressman

Autumn sunshine poured through the windows of the church basement, lighting the faces of those gathered for the Saturday workshop on “Dealing with Differences in the Family of Faith.” In an introductory exercise, I asked each participant to find a partner and complete this sentence by sharing their own experience: “I find I do best in a conflict situation when ...” Around the room people paired off and began animated conversations. Their lively talk continued to fill the hall as they proceeded to complete the next sentence: “The Christian teaching that most informs my stance toward conflict is ...”

But silence fell when I introduced the beginning of the last sentence in the exercise: “One time when I saw or experienced

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reconciliation within a congregation was ...” Eventually, a few quiet voices could be heard, then a few more. As people recounted their stories, faces lightened, listeners leaned close. We all wanted to hear about those rare moments when conflict was transformed, when disagreements were somehow turned into strengthened relationship, creative problem solving, healing, and growth. In these cases, how was conflict transformed into

reconciliation? What were the turning points along the way? How did the journey unfold?

Reconciliation, it seems to me, is the hoped-for destination of a journey through conflict. Sometimes in my work in church conflict transformation, I have the privilege of seeing a congregation arrive there. More often, the journey is partial. On occasion, I consider the travel successful even if it is only begun. Many of us in the church are so afraid of conflict that to openly address it in any helpful way is a Spirit-graced feat.

We're terrified of conflict, yet we yearn for authentic Christian community. Congregations that at one time or another have reached the destination know that you can't easily have the latter without the former, because the kind of Christian community that can find its way to reconciliation on the other side of bitter conflict is one in which people speak the truth to each other. This is something the apostle Paul says we need to do, because "we are members of one another" (Eph. 4:25). His next words are, "Be angry." Speaking our truth, being real, may involve conflict.

But that's not necessarily a bad thing. It is in our times of conflict that God can most easily get our attention, break in, and do a new thing among us. There is wisdom in the saying, "If you're making change, expect conflict." When God changes, stretches, and transforms the church, we should expect conflict.

Think back over your adult life for a moment, to a period of intense emotional or spiritual growth. Did conflict have any part in it? Was there conflict within you, or between you and others? What is true for us individually is also true for the church.

Conflict is a part of authentic community, a part of change, and a part of growth. But for conflict to become life-giving, we need to be intentional in how we make use of it.

Principles for engaging congregational conflict constructively

When I ask congregations that have succeeded in engaging conflict constructively, "What advice would you give other congregations?" several common principles emerge:

Work at lowering people's fear of conflict at church. Normalize it. Highlight examples of people in the Bible who worked out their differences successfully—and not so successfully. Note that conflict was a normal part of Jesus' life, and the life of the early church. It has been a normal part of the Christian life ever since.

Use the resources of our faith. Pray for guidance and grace. Sing hymns and songs that speak of God's constancy. Explore the Christian scriptures through the lens of conflict resolution, looking for principles and practices to adopt in your own setting.

Don't ignore conflict. Expect it. Watch for it. Welcome it, and prepare your congregation with strategies and skills to use it.

Catch it small. According to Matthew 18:15 and Matthew 5:23-24, whoever first becomes aware of a breach in relationship

is responsible to go to the other and seek reconciliation. This instruction applies if you are the one sinned against or the one who remembers, at the altar in Jerusalem, that someone three days' walk back in Galilee has something against you.

Deal directly. The scriptures above suggest not only that we act as soon as we become aware of a breach, but that we do so, first of all, by going directly to the other or others involved to try to work it out. If Christians actually did this, 80 percent of my

Scriptures suggest that as soon as we become aware of a breach, we go directly to the others involved to try to work it out. If Christians did this, 80 percent of my work would vanish.

work would vanish. Congregations that succeed at reconciliation provide guidelines, training, and support for addressing difficulties one on one.

Take responsibility for your own contribution to the difficulty. Luke 6:41-42 instructs us to start by examining and correcting our own actions, words, and attitudes. Only then do we attend to the others' contribution.

Practice respectful communication. In Matthew 18:15, Jesus says that if your brother or sister can hear you, you've won him or her back into right relationship. We make it easier for the other to hear us by speaking only for ourselves, and by speaking in specific terms about our take on the most recent example of the difficulty between us. It's true that Paul tells us to be angry (Eph. 4:26), but he qualifies these words by instructing us not to sin in our anger, and not to let the sunset find us still nursing it. We're to be direct, respectful, and specific in sharing our experiences, emotions, and preferences for the future—and then we're to let the anger go.

Model these practices. Especially if you are a person in a position to influence others within the church, your modelling is a powerful force for health or hindrance.

Welcome disagreement. Assume that God has blessed the congregation, for its up-building and growth, with people of widely differing perspectives, needs, theologies, experiences, gifts, skills, preferences, and maturity levels. Assume that one of the ways the Spirit speaks to the church is through the gathered body. Design feedback loops and decision-making processes that encourage all members to helpfully share their insights, ideas, and wisdom with the church. Acts 15 provides a useful model: people speak out of

their life experience and understanding of scripture, listen carefully, and build consensus. Develop and agree on norms for your interaction with one another and hold yourselves to a high standard of mutual respect and civility.

Help each other work through conflict. In the Gospels and in the writings of Paul, we see that we are not to leave our Christian brothers and sisters to suffer through conflict alone. We are to come alongside them and help them. Matthew 18:16-17 suggests that the church needs to be prepared to offer mediation, and then arbitration, if people are unable to find reconciliation on their own. In Philippians 4:2, we see Paul locating help for two women in conflict. He requests that a fellow church member, whom he addresses as “loyal companion,” give them a hand.

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In 1 Corinthians 6, the corporate mandate to help others is even stronger. There, two men are taking each other to court. Paul doesn't chastise them for having a dispute, but he has harsh words for others in the congregation who are leaving these men with no recourse but the secular courts as a forum for addressing their conflict. Is it possible, he writes, that there is not a single person in your

fellowship wise enough to settle a dispute between believers? “I say this to your shame” (1 Cor. 6:5). Paul is concerned not so much about the existence of conflict in the church but about how the conflict is being addressed. The church needs to offer help to Christians in conflict. Paul notes that when one suffers, we all suffer, because we're members of one body (1 Cor. 12:26). We are all entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18).

Stories of engaging congregational conflict constructively

What follows are several stories about how congregations today have put into practice some of these scriptural principles.¹

Busting gossip. First Church prided itself on being a historic peace church. Unfortunately, a consequence seemed to be that people at First would not raise concerns with each other, lest they disturb the peace. Instead, they shared their concerns, complaints, and hurts with anyone except those who could actually address

them. The leadership at First hosted a series of “Speaking the Truth in Love” workshops. The trainer led them in exploring the biblical mandate for direct communication. They practiced speaking for themselves and being specific, and they renewed their skills in active listening. Together they decided under what conditions it would be appropriate to confront another directly, acknowledging that in some cultures and situations intentional indirect communication would be preferable, and they practiced those skills. Because it’s not so much gossips but amplifiers—those who pass gossip along—that subvert direct communication, the group also did role-plays in which they responded to indirect communication by using these “gossip-busting questions” outlined by Speed Leas, a specialist in conflict management for religious organizations. When person A is telling you about his or her concern about person B, ask:

1. “Have you talked to B about this?”
2. “How can I help you prepare to talk with B about it?”
3. If you are someone who is trusted by both A and B, you might ask, “Would you like me to get you and B together and help you talk about this?”
4. Otherwise, you could ask, “Would you like me to pass your concern along to B, with your name attached, and invite B to get back to you?”
5. If A’s answer to all of the above is “No,” then say, “Well, it’s your call. Let me know if you change your mind.”

The members of First Church had fun and found that the training left them feeling encouraged, equipped, and empowered to communicate directly with more skill and less fear.

Practicing holy manners. The Session of Knox Church knew that the personal attacks which passed as “forceful presentation of issues” in session meetings were making those meetings unproductive and unpleasant. They also knew that what members of the session modelled had an influence on how others in the church interacted. The evidence was audible in the accusing and dismissive ways church members spoke to one another when they disagreed.

The session decided to clean up their act. First they took some time in each meeting to study Gilbert Rendle’s *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences*.²

Then they agreed on guidelines for their interaction as elders. Part of their covenant was a commitment to talk about their own experience and understanding, using the word *I*. They would not talk about “everyone” or “some people.” Further, when speaking of concerns about others or the congregation, they would use descriptive words, not evaluative ones. Posting their covenant on the wall of their meeting room, reading it aloud at the start of each meeting, and holding one another to it created a sense of safety in their meetings that allowed creativity to flourish and transformed their relationships. Finally, they shared the covenant with the congregation and invited others to apply these disciplines when they brought concerns to church leaders.

The next time a letter from an angry parishioner arrived, the session returned it with a reminder of the guidelines and a request that she rewrite it using descriptive *I*-language. To their amazement, the writer was grateful for a chance to express her concern more grace-fully. She had regretted her angry tone as soon as she’d dropped the letter in the mailbox. Moreover, she deeply appreciated the respect the session displayed in their request—respect for her, for the person who was the object of her concern, and for the welfare of the church. She said she felt pastored by their care.

Instituting feedback loops. The leadership of St. Mark’s kept feeling blind-sided. Every time things seemed to be running smoothly, a congregational crisis would explode in their faces. Factions would form, relationships would suffer, ministry would slow. Lurching from crisis to crisis left them exhausted. They needed to find a way to stay in touch with the congregation and get problems out into the open while the conflicts were still manageable. Thus began St. Mark’s quarterly Speak-Easy. The leaders decided to host a potluck lunch after worship every three months, for which the ministers baked desserts. Childcare after lunch allowed parents to participate in the Speak-Easy, an open-agenda congregational meeting. In small and large groups, adults and teens reflected on the successes and challenges of the past quarter, and those anticipated in the coming quarter.

The chair kept notes on flip charts in front of the group, so no ideas would be lost. She invited participants to share their disagreement: “We have forty-two people in this room. I assume that means we have forty-two different experiences of life at St. Mark’s.

We need to hear them all if we're to get a broad understanding of what's before us." "We all seem to be in agreement. If you have a different opinion, we especially need to hear from you now." Holding a Speak-Easy once each quarter means that people at St. Mark's have a chance to raise red flags when concerns are at the stage of what veteran pastor and conflict management trainer John Savage calls a "pinch" rather than a "crunch." No one needs to sit on a concern for more than thirteen weeks before raising it publicly for discussion and action.

Other churches, facing the same need, regularly publicize the names and phone numbers of people serving on a Listening Committee, who invite congregants to direct ideas and concerns to appropriate parties, with the help of committee members. Some congregations post clearly designated steps, frequently reiterated, for bringing concerns forward in writing. Others gather signed semiannual surveys. Some church councils inform the congregation about key issues they'll be dealing with in upcoming months and invite input. All of these methods say: "Disagreement and conflict are normal and expected here. This is how we express them responsibly and use them constructively."

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Acting as loyal companions. Something was going on between Esther and Luella, valued matriarchs at Grace Church. They used to be the best of friends. Now their hostility for each other was barely concealed. The women's group had become a battle zone, with older members choosing sides and younger women staying home to avoid the oppressive atmosphere. Pastor Rhonda

puzzled about what to do. Both Esther and Luella were proud women. In the past, when Rhonda had sensed that either of them had a problem, her queries had been briskly rebuffed. Still, those difficulties had never had this kind of fallout, which was affecting the ministry Rhonda was trying to build with the young women of the church. If she addressed the tension openly, she was sure both Esther and Louella would deny that anything was wrong. Rhonda decided just to pay attention and watch for the right moment to intervene.

Within a week there was a funeral at the church. At the reception afterward, Rhonda had a chance to observe Esther and Luella in the kitchen. When one entered, the other would leave. They did not speak or make eye contact. Rhonda had what she needed. The next day she stopped in to visit Luella and described her observations. “I care for both you and Esther,” she said, “and I know you used to be good friends. I’m having a hard time putting that together with what I saw yesterday. Please help me understand.” When Luella finished her explanation, Rhonda asked if she would be open to meeting with Esther to talk about the problem, with help from Rhonda and an elder of their choice. Luella assured her that she would be willing, but that Esther would never agree. “That may be, but if she does, would you?” With Luella’s agreement in hand, Rhonda visited Esther, again described her observations, and again offered help.

By simply describing what she saw and heard between them, Rhonda was able to get past their denial, resistance, and embarrassment. If the need arose, she could have also described the fight-or-flight responses she was observing in the women’s group. Her willingness to intervene as a companion to Esther and Louella led to new understanding, respect, forgiveness, and ultimately reconciliation—the building of a new, more resilient relationship between the two women.

When have *you* seen or experienced reconciliation within a congregation? When it occurred, it did not happen by accident. What made it possible? My hope is that as we explore, identify, and share with one another the things that make for peace, the ministry of reconciliation will flourish among us, and we’ll have plenty of stories to tell.

Notes

¹ Names of congregations and individuals in these stories have all been changed.

² Gilbert R. Rendle, *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences* ([Bethesda, MD]: Alban Institute, 1999).

About the author

Nan Cressman was founding coordinator of Canada’s first church-based conflict resolution service, Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Conciliation Services of Canada, from 1990 to 2001. She now has a nondenominational practice in church conflict transformation, Conciliation Services Canada.