

How congregations can make their way through times of conflict

A Broken Body

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When I was in ninth grade, Pastor Mike, my confirmation pastor, made an apology from the pulpit. I didn't know what he had done, but his apology seemed sincere. So I forgave him and thought nothing more about it.

Two weeks later he left the church. When I heard that news, I thought I was going to be sick. Like most ninth graders, I found the sermons kind of boring, but I really liked Pastor Mike. He always had time for me. He always gave me a big smile when I entered church. Now he was suddenly gone, and I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye.

I wasn't the only one whose stomach was doing somersaults. Other people were also asking why his apology hadn't been accepted by the church. Why did he have to leave? They wondered what happened to forgiveness and understanding. They couldn't understand how a church could do that to a pastor.

I never attended that church again.

When I was in graduate school, it happened again. My pastor left the church and I didn't know why. I left that church too and vowed never to be a part of a congregation where that kind of thing could happen.

I hated conflict. It was painful, and I was sure that it destroyed relationship. Soon after my wife, Meg, and I started seeing each other we got into a fight. It was the first time I had fought with someone I was dating, so when she called the next morning to say hi I was surprised. I thought our fight meant the relationship was over. She told me I was being silly. Slowly my perspective began to change. Maybe conflict didn't have to mean the end of relationship.

I still tried to avoid conflict in church. It was convenient to be a ninth grader with a mother who was

an itinerant organist. I was able to leave Pastor Mike's church easily and attend the church where my mother was playing. In graduate school, it was easy to leave that church too. After all, I was moving away when I completed my degree. By leaving I could avoid conflict. I thought it also meant I could avoid the pain.

But I was wrong. My leaving meant the end of relationship with my friends in the youth group. Leaving meant I was never able to come to terms with what happened. To this day it still hurts when I think about Pastor Mike. And I still have negative feelings toward that church. I haven't been able to work through them.

For many years I kept my vow to stay away from churches that might involve conflict. We church-hopped after I left the church in graduate school, never getting too involved. When we moved back home, we returned to a church we loved. It had no history of conflict that I was aware of, so I felt safe. A few years later, however, the church began to experience serious conflict. To my surprise, the issues creating this conflict were incredibly complex. The leaders were being criticized for not making good decisions and for not caring. Yet I knew these leaders. I knew how deeply they cared about the church. I knew they wouldn't act without the church's best interests in mind. I also knew the people who were criticizing the leaders. They, too, really cared about the church. There were no easy black-and-white answers for handling this conflict. Recognizing this, I could no longer keep my vow. I stayed at the church. With God's help, we found our way through the conflict.

Now I actually work with churches to help them address conflict directly. I have learned that facing difficult

conversations head-on is most often the best way to work through conflict. That doesn't mean being direct is easy. It's still tempting to avoid conflict. But when we avoid conflict in the church, often more damage occurs. If we wait until the pressure builds, then we risk gravely wounding each other when we finally address the underlying causes. Or, as in my experience, we never have the opportunity to find healing. Then working through those issues becomes much more difficult and results in a longer recovery time for the church.

But sometimes congregations find

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ways to go through conflict to foster healthy relationships on the other side. These congregations seem to have certain characteristics in common.

One characteristic is the presence of strong leadership, both from the laity and the pastoral staff. They choose to address conflict directly. They possess the courage to make the difficult decisions necessary to help move the church forward. Often many will not understand those decisions. So after the difficult decisions have been made, strong leadership stays and deals directly with the consequences, both those that were anticipated and those that were not.

Strong leadership is also willing to lead without having to be right. A few years ago, I participated in a leadership training program that included four weeklong retreats over a ten-month period. After the first

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retreat, we were informed that one of the members of our cohort had been asked not to return. Although the twenty-three of us who remained had experienced some difficulties in our interactions with this person, we were deeply concerned about the decision. We questioned whether the “right” call had been made.

A couple of days later, we received an email from the person who had made the decision. She acknowledged the possibility that her decision might be the wrong one, saying, “This is true with any decision that we make as leaders. We can never know with full certainty that the course of action we are taking is the best one.” She then asked us to stay with the process and see where it took us. To this day, I don’t know if the decision she made was the “right” one. I do know that the person who was asked not to return ended up seeing the wisdom of the decision, and the rest of us were able to move on and we learned much about leadership over the remaining three retreats.

Strong leadership leads with strength and resolve but also possesses a humble willingness to listen to the concerns of the congregation and to incorporate congregational feedback into its decisions. They are also willing to be seen as wrong when they choose not to reveal all that they know about a situation in order to care for those involved. And they recognize their limits. When they lack resources or direction or are making major decisions, they ask for help from conference and denominational leaders and/or consult with professionals who can help them through the process.

Strong leadership also recognizes the challenge of finding balance between lay and pastoral leadership. Both are called by the church to lead. Both recognize the importance of the other. Acknowledging these challenges, both recognize that the church is not theirs, but theirs to serve.

A second characteristic of congregations that come out healthy on the other side of conflict is the willingness of the members to stick around in the midst of difficult situations. In order for any relationship to work, all parties must be willing to remain committed to each other. Working through conflict, taking time to understand the decisions of the leadership, developing new perspectives, and healing seldom happen quickly. When members leave in the midst of conflict, that doesn’t allow time to do the necessary work, both by the congregation and by God.

Staying through conflict recognizes that conflict is a natural, maybe even healthy, part of being the church. To think otherwise does not embrace the biblical story. God understands conflict. God recognized conflict as a natural part of relationship early on and blessed it when he named his people Israel. The name “Israel” means “wrestles with God.” God didn’t condemn the wrestling. He merely named it.

Conflict didn’t end at the resurrection of Jesus either. Disagreements showed up fairly quickly in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 1:11, Paul wrote, “For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you.” In Acts 15, Paul himself experienced serious conflict with Barnabas. They couldn’t resolve their issues, so they split and went on two separate missionary journeys.

Today conflict remains common within congregations. Faith Communities Today (FACT), a nonprofit entity of Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut, took a survey about church conflict in 2000. Of the more than 14,000 churches that responded, 75 percent reported some congregational conflict. Twenty-five percent reported serious conflict. The conflicts occurred over a wide variety of issues, including leadership style and leadership choices, worship and music style, conflict between individuals or within families, and the pres-

ence of inappropriate relationships. Conflicts were also reported about ownership and power: how decisions were made; how money was spent; and who had access to information. Many times these issues led to distrust between members, which led to even more conflict.

A third characteristic of congregations that find a healthy way through their conflict is the willingness to communicate with each other—to listen to each other’s stories. My experiences in mediating conflict have convinced me that the more we get to know each other’s stories, the more we have the ability to accept each other as we are.

Like all good residents of the North Side of Chicago, I’m a Cubs fan. Only South Siders cheer for the White Sox, so I could never figure out why my friend Peter was such a rabid Sox fan. Peter grew up on the North Side and his father was an avid Cubs fan. His loyalty just didn’t make sense. Then I heard his story. Peter became a Sox fan when his favorite player, Greg Luzinski, was traded from the Phillies to the Sox. He even served as an honorary bat boy at Comiskey Park when he was ten years old. The next day his North Side friends teased him mercilessly about being a traitor. That solidified his White Sox allegiance.

Other people’s perspectives make much more sense once we know the stories behind them. When we don’t know each other’s stories, the misunderstandings between us deepen. Hearing those stories requires us to suspend judgment and be willing to listen. Time after time I have heard comments such as, “Wow, I never knew that happened,” or, “I guess what they did makes sense.” When we realize that our perspective is not the only valid one, we begin to recognize the complexity of a situation and better understand why people behave the way they do.

Of course hearing and understanding another person’s story doesn’t make the conflict or disagreement dis-

appear. Even though I understand him better, Peter and I will never agree. He will always be a fan of the black and white; I will always love Cubbie blue. In *The Seven Principles for Making Marriages Work*, John Gottman and Nan Silver point out that in healthy marital relationships, 69 percent of the conflict is not resolved. The couples remain healthy because they are constantly working out and talking about their conflict. Their communication keeps the conflict from becoming overwhelming.

If 69 percent of conflict is not resolved between two people, expecting conflict to be 100 percent resolved between fifty or two hundred or a thousand individuals in a congregation is unrealistic. The goal is not to *resolve* the differing viewpoints within a congregation. The goal is to *increase understanding and acceptance* between members, to remember that the congregation desires to worship together and to love God and others, and to find a way to make it work as well as possible even when there is disagreement.

Finally, congregations that come out healthy on the other side of conflict are always praying and attempting to give witness to grace. The praying, grace-filled congregation recognizes that the kingdom of God is both now and not yet. It knows it isn't perfect and its members aren't perfect. It knows that even when the conflict has been worked through, it will still be messy. There will be lingering feelings and disagreements that may not go away. It knows that even though the goal is for everyone to remain in the community, some members will leave because they have experienced too much pain. In such congregations members recognize that no one person or group is always right—that even they sometimes might be wrong. As a result, they are willing to listen to the will of the entire congregation. And a praying, grace-filled church has faith that God is in the midst of all



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that is occurring in the congregation and then trusts that God will create an Easter Sunday from the Good Friday they are experiencing.

Being grace-filled is not easy. But grace-full practices can be fostered. After my congregation found its way through conflict, we participated in a Veritas workshop developed by the denomination and led by our conference. At this workshop we crafted a relational covenant. Here is how it reads:

Our relational covenant is a guiding statement about how we choose to live with one another as the body of Christ in times of joy and times of challenge.

We hold grace as our highest value.

We practice honest, open, direct communication.

We speak the truth in love and listen in love.

We believe the best about each other, valuing others above ourselves, as Christ does.

We allow room for mistakes, acknowledging that mistakes are part of the growth process.

I wish we had adopted this relational covenant before we experienced our conflict. I think it might have

affected how we handled our disagreements. Nevertheless, it is now a great guide for us. It reminds us of who we want to be.

Last spring I had the honor to return to a church community that was more than 130 years old. Eighteen months earlier serious conflict had threatened to tear their congregation apart. But they had successfully worked through their conflict and now they were asking me to lead a workshop on handling conflict better as they moved forward.

When I got to the church, I found the congregation to be thriving. While some of the old struggles remained, many others had been worked through. The church had lost some members, but a number of new families had started attending. Overall, it felt much different compared to the first time I was there. The mood was hopeful and upbeat. Though we weren't able to put it into words until later, the congregation was marking the end of a painful time in its history and acknowledging a new beginning. It was a great celebration.

There will always be conflict in churches as long as there are people and those people care about their church. Conflict is rarely easy. Nevertheless, congregations can develop characteristics to foster being healthy on the other side of conflict. These characteristics include strong lay leadership, a willingness to stay and not leave in the midst of conflict, communication that includes hearing each other's stories, and a prayerful desire to be grace-filled. When these traits and practices are present, congregations can find more effective ways to work through conflict. Done well, conflict can lead a congregation to become healthier and better able to worship together and love God and others. ■

 For an expanded conversation with Brian Madvig, go to CovChurch.tv/companion-january-2013-feature.