

Connections

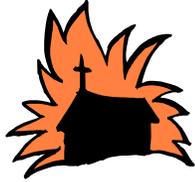
A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Church conflict— how can we help?



Since writing last month's *Connections* about conflict, I've learned how reluctant many churches are to work at resolving their conflict, despite the availability of competent help. I've learned more, too, about how common serious church conflict is. According to JUSTPEACE, the independent Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation established in 2000 by the United Methodist Church, studies show that 26% of churches are highly conflicted and that one out of every fifty is sued each year.

Unfortunately during the past month I've also become more dismayed by the conflict that has been smoldering in my own congregation for several years but is largely being ignored despite having recently burst into flame. Most members apparently don't even know what ignited it, and the underlying causes



aren't being openly addressed, yet we're told that the tumult is all in the past.

What if you're in authority?

Because this local situation is so painful to me and so much on my mind, and because I'm still hearing from *Connections* readers about the pain and harm they've seen coming from unresolved church conflicts, I'm revisiting the subject here. To a great extent I'm at a loss to know how to influence the church conflict I see at the local level and beyond, but it seems to me there are steps that could help if more members took them.



What might you do to help if your local church is in conflict and you're in a position of authority in it—if you're the pastor or a lay member of a church governing body?



Some sources of help

From responses to last month's *Connections* I've discovered several sources of information that you may find useful if you want help in dealing with conflict in your church. I have no firsthand experience with using their services, but based on what I've seen of their materials and what I've heard from people who have used their services, I think you'd at least find them good starting points for ideas and information.



One is JUSTPEACE, which was established by the United Methodist Church but is an independent organization. You can find helpful materials on its website, www.justpeaceumc.org/home.htm. Among them is a 16-page booklet, *Engage Conflict Well*, which you can download free as a pdf file. This inspiring little booklet includes pertinent scriptures and sentence prayers plus numerous thought-provoking quotes from both ancient and contemporary authors. It eloquently describes the aims, the process, and the beneficial outcomes of wise conflict resolution. The booklet also lists books related to conflict resolution, and organizations that offer training.



Also available from the same website is a pdf file of notes for the workshops in which JUSTPEACE trains conflict transformation teams. Whether or not you're interested in attending such a workshop, I think you'll find the case studies and exercises in those notes helpful to read and think about.

Another informative website describes the conflict style inventory and other materials and services created by Ron Kraybill, director of the Conflict Transformation Program of Eastern Mennonite University. You can find it at www.riverhousepress.com.

Still another helpful source is The Alban Institute, an ecumenical organization that offers workshops and other forms of training in conflict resolution, besides publishing books on this subject and many others related to church operation. You can investigate Alban's offerings at www.alban.org.

If your church is in conflict, I hope you'll consider the help available from these or other such sources.

■ Speak and act bravely

If you have authority in the church during conflict, I hope you'll speak openly and take the action that your position permits and obligates you to take. I hope you won't just hope the conflict will go away, because it probably won't. More likely, it will fester under the surface and do increasing harm.



"I lived through more than one of these," a *Connections* reader wrote me. "Usually, it was kept quiet or dealt with minimally until the noise had abated and the problem had been shoved far enough underground for people to pretend it wasn't there. As a result, it finally blew up into a full-fledged crisis."

Blessed are you
when people hate
you, and when they
exclude you, revile
you, and defame
you on account of
the Son of Man.

—Luke 6:22

Ignoring the conflict may be the most comfortable response, of course. It may let you avoid criticism and, if you're clergy, loss of status or income too. However,

it's probably not what God calls you to do.

■ Avoid wounding others

Even if ignoring the conflict is the most comfortable route for you as a leader, it's likely to hurt others. "I had never imagined the church could inflict such pain," wrote a *Connections* reader. "It was as though the whole concept of being in community had nothing to do with the mission of the church. The pain of that incident will forever be with me and members of my family."



Another writes, "Your thoughts about healing the church spoke to a deep emotional and wounded part of me. Probably if the reconciliation process you describe had been in place in the church when I was in the process of leaving, I would not have had to take that step."

■ Don't run a closed shop

If you're in authority in a church where major conflict exists, I hope you'll seriously consider enlisting competent outside help. Several *Connections* readers wrote me about harmful effects of pastors' refusing to get help or enlisting someone who lacked the necessary skills and neutrality. Too often, it

seems, when pastors bring in help they bring a clergy friend rather than a trained outsider. That may be an effort to save money, or it may be done hoping that the consultant will recommend what the pastor wants, but it can do more harm than good.

Here's how one reader described this method's effect on her congregation. "The church in conflict often becomes a closed shop. I suggested a very experienced lay person to lead the conflict resolution, but the bishop sent in the clergy person who is appointed to do this. He went through a prescribed program that did little to get at root causes, and his report was biased toward the clergyman who was the source of most of the difficulties. The offending pastor went to another church a year later and lasted less than one year before they booted him out."

■ Seek minority views

If you're in authority I hope you'll actively seek out the members whose views differ from yours and from the majority view. I hope you'll keep listening to them and include them in church decision-making groups. We know from the Bible and Christian history that God's voice has often come through minorities and people rejected by religious institutions.



■ Know the rules, system, and people

When you're put in a position of authority, immediately find out its duties. Get familiar with the official rules of your denomination and congregation. If you're lay, don't depend only on your pastor for this information. Find and read it in its official form. Learn who has the power positions in your denomination, and what they have (and don't have) authority and responsibility for.

In authority or not, get the facts

If you're lay, whether or not you hold an office or are in a church governing body, find out how decisions are made and policies are established in your congregation and denomination. Learn who holds the key positions in your congregation and what they're supposed to do. Let them know your views, and find out theirs. When you're not sure what's happening or why, ask and keep asking until you get the answers.



■ Reexamine your beliefs



The hardest conflicts to resolve seem to be those that are based on differences in religious beliefs. Even within Christianity, conflict about beliefs is tearing apart not only local congregations but also entire denominations. Some of today's most bitter conflict between Christians comes from disagreement about whether homosexuality is sinful, but that's far from the only source. Disagreements about whether any war is just, whether abortion is acceptable under any circumstances, and whether stem-cell research is sinful are also pitting Christians against each other. At the root of all these conflicts is disagreement about how to interpret the Bible

■ Reexamine the Bible and history

In the church we've mostly let members' childhood pictures of the Bible and of God stay unexamined. We've let members rely only on a few scattered Bible verses that confirm their prejudices and preserve their comfort. We've rarely nudged them to look at the often uncomfortable topics to which Jesus apparently gave the most attention. We've rarely talked about how Jesus's teachings might apply to today's controversial political and social issues. We haven't discussed how today's scientific and medical findings might change the ancient pictures of the world and of human beings that are found in the Bible.



It's no wonder, therefore, that conflict arises when some members want the church to change familiar doctrines and practices as a result of new information and insights. It's hard in the midst of conflict, especially over an emotionally charged subject, to get members to consider for the first time

views of God or the Bible that differ from what they've previously assumed. A step we need to take as individuals and also in church groups, therefore, when we see conflict based on differences in belief, is to get information. If you're not sure how the Bible reached its present form, find out. (You might read Marcus Borg's book *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, for example, or the recent *Misquoting Jesus*, by Bart Ehrman.) If you haven't read the gospels recently, read them. Notice how Jesus treated the social outcasts of his day, and think how this might apply to how we treat those of our day. Think what Jesus seems likely to say about war.



Another helpful step would be to refresh on basic Christian history and the widely varied understandings of Christianity that have been part of it. Find out how and when familiar belief statements like the Apostles' Creed originated. (It wasn't with the Apostles.) Find out why and when the now-all-pervasive theory of substitutionary atonement became so prominent. (It was about 1100 years after Jesus, and it's merely one of several views of atonement that are "in the Bible.") Notice, too, how many doctrines that church members now tend to accept without question came not from the Bible or Jesus but merely from the winners in fierce political battles.

■ Share experiences

Besides not giving much information about the Bible and Christian history, we haven't often encouraged sharing of the personal experiences that influence our beliefs. Actively seeking out the views of people who differ from you is thus immensely important when conflict arises. Find out what has led them to their views. Ask yourself how you might feel differently if your experience had been more

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 13 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

like theirs. Seriously consider whether they may be seeing valid points that you've been overlooking, about the issues you disagree on.



Conflict doesn't have to be damaging

Church conflict is usually painful, but it's an unavoidable part of change, even when the change is needed. Sweeping conflict under the rug and refusing to acknowledge it and learn from it can cause long-lasting damage, but conflict doesn't have to be harmful. If it is dealt with early and wisely, and if its

causes are openly examined, it can actually serve a good purpose. It can show where change is needed and can motivate much-needed change. It can motivate us to look at viewpoints we've overlooked, dismissed, or been unaware of but need to consider.

As one reader pointed out after thinking about last month's *Connections*, "out of conflict have come some of the greatest forward steps for the Christian movement. In that testimony of history lies hope."



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Connections

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Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal position for just such a time as this."

Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, "... Hold a fast on my behalf. ... After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish."

—Esther 4:12-16



Maybe you have come to your present position in the church, whether it's a "royal position" of official leadership or not, for just such a time of conflict as this.

Maybe God is calling you to be a brave Esther, speaking up on behalf of victims of injustice.

What "king" in your church might you need to go to, even if it is against the rules or traditions?