

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 62 - DECEMBER 1997



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Conflict in the church— we don't all see it alike



I constantly have a hard time remembering that my reaction to events is very different from the reaction of people whose personalities are different from mine. Evidently a lot of us have that problem, and it has a big influence on our way of dealing with conflict in the church.

Some people evaluate events mainly on the basis of how they affect people. Conflict or even disagreement makes these people very uncomfortable. Describers of personalities call them "feeling types." By contrast, "thinking types," of whom I'm one, base their decisions and choices mainly on what seems logical. They want to be objective and to discuss all sides of issues.



Feeling types are fully capable of thinking, and thinking types aren't unfeeling. The difference is in what each type is more likely to notice and to consider most important. What feeling types consider unbearably painful conflict, thinking types may not even notice.

What conflict?

I realized this difference several years ago in a Sunday School class. When any class member commented on the lesson material (which rarely happened), it was only to say something like "Isn't that wonderful!" instead of addressing the real issues raised by the material. I found that uninteresting and pointless. Finally some of us persuaded the



group to study some topics that would trigger discussion and a variety of opinions. To me it was a big improvement.

Soon, however, I noticed that a formerly faithful attender hadn't come recently. I asked her if she had been sick or out of town. "No," she said, "I just

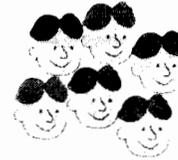
Love isn't always comfortable

How can the church be truthful and also be loving? It's hard. Hearing or speaking the truth can be very uncomfortable, yet many church members feel that only what is emotionally comfortable is loving.

Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ ...
—Ephesians 4:15

If we use good feelings as our standard for determining what is loving and what isn't, we're likely to come to the conclusion that speaking the truth is unacceptable. Yet God evidently wants us to speak the truth to each other in the church whether it is comfortable or not.

The many lay and clergy church members who use feelings as their main standard of measuring whether or not a way of behaving is right tend to get the mistaken impression that whatever feels uncomfortable shouldn't be allowed. These members come to feel that because open disagreement is painful for them it should be stifled.



And because people who react this way are in the majority in the church, it's easy for them to get the impression that everyone shares their view and thus that it's right. But being the view of the majority doesn't make anything right.

God often sends uncomfortable messages

Throughout the Bible and the rest of Christian history, we find God calling people to speak truth that its hearers find very uncomfortable. The God-given views that these prophetic leaders have expressed have rarely been the majority view. And God has often called such leaders to speak uncomfortable truth to the people who were considered the most religious, not just to the people who didn't even claim to be following God's will. All the Old Testament prophets spoke uncomfortable truth, and so did Jesus. So did Paul, Martin Luther, John Wesley, and many other Christian leaders right up to our own time.



Making feelings the standard is dangerous

It is important for the church not to stifle any voices just because they make us uncomfortable or because they're in the minority. When we do this, we keep the church from following God's will.

can't stand all that conflict." I was stunned. I wondered, "What conflict?" I hadn't noticed any. To me, the class had become interesting and enjoyable for the first time.



More "feeling types" in the church

The U.S. population is split about half-and-half between these two types, but the church is not. Because much of the church's ministry aims at direct help to people and at transforming individual lives, both the laity and the clergy of most churches include many more feeling types than thinking types. As a result, when the thinking types express information and opinions that they think need to be considered, many of the laity and the clergy experience the result as harmful conflict. Some see the thinking types' well-meant efforts as personal attacks that are painful or even cruel.

Tradition or innovation?



Another kind of personality difference also affects how church members react to proposals for change. Some people give great importance to established institutions and to officially designated leadership roles like pastor, chairperson, and president. They consider tradition, history, standard operating procedures, and predictability very important. They're easily upset by the speculation, brainstorming, and experimenting that people of other personality types find helpful or even essential.

These tradition-loving people make up more than a third of the U.S. population. They are a much larger part of the membership of most mainline churches, however, because these churches include many features that people with this personality prefer.



Titles or abilities?

Other people, whose personality type occurs in much smaller numbers in the population and also in mainline churches, give much less importance to tradition, long-standing institutions, and official roles and titles. People of these types often envision and propose innovations that they believe would be more effective than the present



organizational structures and methods. They feel little need to defer to someone just because he or she has an official role or title. What seems most important to people of this type is getting the job done that needs doing, by whoever is most competent at doing it.



Other factors also influence us

Of course, personality differences aren't the only factors that influence our reaction to what happens within and around us. Many other influences, including our cultural background, personal experience, and family patterns, also carry a lot of weight.

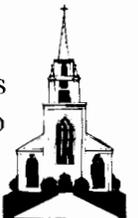


What was happening in the world around us at crucial times in our lives has a lot of influence, too. Today's younger generations, for example, tend to place much less importance

on official authority roles than people in older generations do. Disillusionment with authority figures during the Vietnam era seems to have contributed to this generational difference. The faster rate of technological change that younger generations have grown up with is an important factor, too.

Conflict shouldn't surprise us

Whatever the causes may include, the effect is that the church includes a lot of members who are very uncomfortable with change, but it also includes some who see an urgent need for change. The church includes many members who feel that bishops and pastors should always be deferred to. But it also includes many to whom these official positions mean little and effectiveness is what counts most.



Besides personality differences and generational differences that have so much influence on our reactions to what we see happening, differences in how we understand the content of our faith and its application in today's world also contribute to the differences of opinion that exist in the church. It's no wonder that we can't make conflict go away.

The real question—how to hear all views

We don't need to. Instead, we need to hear a variety of views in order to make informed and faithful decisions. But because the church includes such a high proportion of people for whom even a tiny



bit of openly expressed disagreement seems unbearably painful, the church's usual way of dealing with conflict is to deny that it exists. If that becomes impossible we deal with it by trying to cover it up, maintain control, and keep things looking pleasant and calm on the surface. We try to oust or at least silence the people who seem to be causing the conflict.

These methods don't work. They don't make the conflict go away, and they often make it worse, because they increase anger in the members who have been stifled. These members then react by becoming more adamant or by enlisting allies in an effort to show that their opinion is correct and important. Or even worse, they leave the church.

Another reason that trying to suppress conflict doesn't work is that the people we try to stifle are often the people who are best at identifying problems and envisioning possible solutions to them. They make us consider doing things in new ways, and that may be what needs to happen, so we need to hear them.

We stifle people we need to hear

The Bible tells us that God gives different people different abilities, and that the church needs all of them. Experience also shows that most groups are most effective when their leadership includes people with a variety of abilities, personality types, and viewpoints. So we need the insights and voices of our envisioners, analyzers, and innovators in the church, even though they make us uncomfortable. We need the people who will notice when the emperor doesn't have any clothes on and will speak up so the rest of us will also notice.



The church needs all of our abilities

The people who are best at doing this aren't the same ones who are best at running the day-to-day operations of the organization. They aren't the same, either, as those who are best at relating warmly to others and inspiring and encouraging

... In one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function. ... We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us ...
—Romans 12:4-6

them. To be effective, the church needs all of these kinds of people.

Hearing them can be uncomfortable

Hearing them can be painful, however. It forces us to acknowledge where our current methods aren't working well. That's scary. And doing something new is always harder than continuing to do what we already know how to do. Also, an uncomfortable time of confusion comes when we've abandoned some old ways but don't yet have effective new ones fully in place. Even more disturbing for leaders, their current skills may not be what proposed new methods will require. That's painful to realize.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

—1 Corinthians 12:4-7

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.

—1 Peter 4:10

Defensiveness harms the church

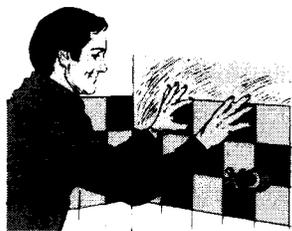


Because church members who push for change seem to be threats to church leaders' power, these leaders tend to see suggestions for change as personal attacks. Top church leaders too often rush to defend themselves against what critics are saying, by trying to keep the critics from being heard and by claiming that they aren't qualified to speak. But this defensiveness harms the church. It keeps us from dealing with the problems that need attention.

Patching the walls but ignoring the foundation

A clergyman hit the nail on the head, I believe, with what he wrote me about a leader's effort to discount what I wrote in *Connections* about how the United Methodist clergy-appointment system is administered. "This kind of defensiveness is always a bad sign," this clergyman wrote, "because it is a response to feeling personally under attack instead of dealing with the real issues that the critic is bringing up. Instead of dealing with the foundation, which is what we





really need to do, a church leader who tries to stifle criticism is merely trying to patch the unsightly cracks in the walls. He criticizes the critics for causing the cracks, when

they are really just pointing out the deeper fault lines that already exist and need to be faced.”

We're paying too high a price

Trying to keep the church looking good on the surface by hiding disagreements and conflict may

keep a lot of church members more comfortable than letting the conflict come into the open, but it keeps the church from addressing crucial issues that it must address if it is to be faithful and effective. We're paying too high a price for keeping members comfortable.

Barbara

Next month . . .

**Uncontrollable voices—
why do they seem so threatening?**



Connections 12-97
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Conflict in the church

Is your church stifling views it needs to hear?

- When disagreement or controversy threatens to surface at your meetings, do members quickly use parliamentary procedure to prevent further discussion?
- Do your meetings consist mainly of reports?
- Do members avoid going to meetings because they feel everything has already been decided?
- Do your Sunday School class lessons present only the viewpoints that most class members share?



If your answer to several of these questions is “yes,” your church may be avoiding conflict that it needs to address openly.

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