

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller, Lyle E. Schaller, Cynthia Woolever - www.TheParishPaper.com

January 2010 - Volume 18, Number 1

Copyright © 2010 by Herb Miller

Become Comfortable with Conflict: Step One to Moving Beyond It!

Internal conflict rattled Christianity during its early years of rapid expansion. Three pioneer leaders—Paul, Peter, and Barnabas—lived at the center of that conflict (Acts 15).

What can we learn from those disagreements?

- *Conflict does not mean we are not Christians.* The first apostles argued about what committed Christians often disagree on: goals and methods.

- *Conflict is normal.* When people work together on important projects—such as marriages, democracies, and churches—they often see things differently.

- *Conflict often produces positive results.* Without disagreements, Christianity might have mummified into a tiny Jewish sect that never made it to Spain or America.

Why, then, are disagreements so stressful?

- *We tend to react inappropriately to disagreements.* When we disagree, most of us either (a) withdraw into silence, (b) become hostile, or (c) try to placate.

- *We have low skill levels in resolving disagreements.* So we avoid face-to-face communication that might resolve the conflict.

- *We want to resolve disagreements instantly rather than in a lengthy process.* Disagreements stop when we stay in relationship with people long enough to find mutually agreeable resolution. That seldom happens in one conversation.

- *We see disagreements as a disaster rather than an opportunity.* Very often, new and better ideas result from discussing passionately held opposite opinions.

How can churches discover the key issues in a disagreement? Ask governing board members to complete this five-minute questionnaire at a regularly scheduled meeting: “My Personal Opinion Regarding Causes of Our Church’s Disagreements.” Ask people not to sign their names. Don’t let people take the sheets home with them. Don’t send the questionnaire out via E-mail, U.S. Mail, or the church newsletter: that *always* produces distorted data (more of the returned surveys come from unhappy people) and *increases* the conflict!

1. During past years, have we usually disagreed about the same issue each time, or a different issue each time? If same issue, what is that issue?

2. If you were forced to name *only one cause* behind our present disagreements, how would you describe that cause?

3. If you were asked to make a list of secondary causes, what would you put on that list?

4. Do you think a staff member or lay leader is doing something illegal or immoral?

5. Please state in one sentence what you specifically *want* to see happen?

At the next governing board meeting, pass the completed questionnaires around the circle. Ask each board member to silently read each sheet. Discuss. Develop appropriate action plans.

How can churches increase their effectiveness in handling disagreements? During a regularly scheduled meeting, ask governing board members to check items on the following list that they think would be helpful in our church. Title the list “Positive Thinking and Behavior Habits.” Ask people not to sign their names. Collect the sheets. Don’t let people take the sheets home with them. Don’t send the sheet out via E-mail, U.S. Mail, or



the church newsletter: that *always* produces distorted data and *increases* the conflict!

1. Promote the philosophy that differences of opinion are acceptable in our congregation; the only unacceptable behavior is unwillingness to discuss the underlying causes.

2. Ask people to stop their fight-and-flight behaviors. We can't resolve problems that damage our church's fellowship and ministries by either skunk behavior or rabbit behavior. Skunks stand and fight in odorous ways that cause rabbit people to run away. Urge skunk-behavior people to stop their flow of negative comments about people with whom they disagree. Urge rabbit-behavior people to stay on the scene instead of getting so far away that no one can hear their concerns.

3. Do not attempt to rescue individuals who try to exert power and control by threatening to withhold financial giving or leave the church.

4. Believe that everyone is of value, but do not tolerate a "church bully" whose overbearing nature leaves no emotional room for other people to disagree.

5. Keep disagreements on the table. Some church leaders fear discussing things in a meeting, because it might create disunity or damage feelings. But when we do not discuss matters openly, conversations go underground—into the parking lot or onto the telephone circuits. This intensifies and lengthens the disagreement. When people say, "Discussing that in a meeting would make matters worse," tell them you feel strongly that the opposite is usually true—*not discussing the issue will make things worse*. Ask them, "Do we want to look back on this later and feel that we didn't try to do everything we could?"

6. Avoid pretending that you want to be "nice"—when you merely lack the courage and honesty to work out differences of opinion.

7. Refuse to substitute talking about one another for talking with one another.

8. Work toward increasing the ability to listen tolerantly to different opinions (loving your neighbor includes forgiving your neighbor for being different from you).

9. Urge people to say directly to each other what they mean; thus, avoiding destructive substitute behaviors such as character assassination, and generalizations.

10. Ask everyone to use *I* pronouns in sentences, such as, "I feel like...." or "It hurts me when...." Urge people to avoid using *you* pronouns in sentences, such as "You always...." Or "You *always* do that!" *I* pronouns accomplish better communication. *I* statements tell how you feel, and everyone is entitled to his or her feelings. Because *you* statements tell how you feel about someone else, *you* statements create anger.

11. Recognize that asserting your own right to an opinion is constructive but denying another person that same right is demeaning.

12. Speak only for yourself, not for others. Do not tolerate the phrase "people are saying." Insist on facts or

the citing of names if people say they are speaking for someone else.

13. What if someone complains about the pastor, a staff member, or a church leader but says, "Please don't use my name"? Advise him or her to communicate directly with that individual. He or she is far more likely to resolve the problem that way.

14. Ask for clarification on specific issues related to differences of opinion. Listen to understand an opinion, not to refute an opinion.

15. Do not interrupt people while they give you their opinion. Care enough to let them finish speaking before you respond.

16. After you listen to a viewpoint that you disagree with, try to paraphrase what you heard—so that the person knows you understand their opinion—before you respond with an opposing opinion.

17. Avoid generalized statements such as "We *always* make that mistake!"

18. Stay focused on specific issues by citing the basis for, or examples of, why you hold a particular viewpoint.

19. Avoid negative labeling of persons or groups with whom you disagree.

20. Permit no personal attacks on current or past congregational leaders or pastors.

21. Discuss differences of opinion, but don't discuss personal motives, intentions, or character.

22. Challenge others' perception of a situation, but don't challenge their motives for believing something.

23. Challenge others' behaviors and ideas, but not their unconscious motivations or worth as a person.

24. Disagree with people while showing courtesy and respect for them.

25. Clearly state the changes you want, rather than harping on what you don't like.

26. Ask leaders to avoid making unilateral decisions. Process all decisions through the committees and governing board.

Count the number of people who checked each of the twenty-six items. Publish your tabulation. This gives parishioners a mutually agreed on standard of behaviors for improving their ability to handle disagreements.

Publish this consensus annually for the governing board and the entire congregation.

The goal: When we become more comfortable with discussing differences of opinion, we find constructive ways to resolve them.