

Embracing Conflict

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Some years ago, there were a series of popular bumper stickers that began with the phrase: “I’d rather be...”—followed by any number of activities such as: “dancing,” “riding my motorcycle,” “scuba diving,” or “in Jamaica.” I even saw one that said, “I’d rather be listening to the voices instead of to you.”

I imagine that when there is conflict within a congregation—between persons, groups, or leaders—that most of us would really “rather be” somewhere else!

Yet, conflict is inescapable in human relationships, including congregations. Even our various scriptures include stories of conflict early on as they describe the human condition. The message is that conflict is inescapable and whenever differences arise—and they will—conflict is present.

It is our everyday and timely responses to differences and conflict that deserve our utmost religious attention and imagination. Rather than shirk the “response-ability” of conflict in our religious communities, we can find ways to engage it as a task that connects us with our spirituality, our community, and our culture.

1. Connect your response to conflict with your spiritual growth.

Amazingly enough, there are those religious communities that are so conflict adverse that they see conflict as something to be avoided or denied at any cost. They imagine that somehow conflict is a sign of being less spiritual, rather than a pathway to hone our spirituality.

Beyond whatever practices we engage in to deal with, differences are the theological touchstones that allow us to stay grounded in the midst of the fury and uncertainty that conflict often arouses in us.

Nineteenth century theologian William Ellery Channing’s theological touchstone was his understanding of the connection of our responses to conflict with spiritual growth. He writes, “Difficulties are meant to rouse, not discourage. The human spirit is to grow strong by conflict.”

Determine the particular scriptures and understandings of religious life that can support and encourage you when you would rather be avoiding conflict. Reflect upon what higher purpose can be served in engaging rather than avoiding a particular difference or conflict in your community. I often ask leaders to reflect upon this: “For what sake would we openly engage each other around these differences? How does this connect with your spiritual purpose as a community?” Once the connection is made, the path, although smooth, is clear.

2. Reflect upon the cost of avoiding

Not responding to differences can have an increasing cost on the vitality, integrity, and morale of a congregation. As most of us know, when mere differences are not dealt with in a constructive way early on, the levels of conflict can deepen. Mere differences of perspective can lead to disagreement, discord, and polarization.¹ It is wise for us to know how to acknowledge, learn from, and utilize our differences early on before those differences escalate in ways that bring more hurt and unnecessary division.

I ask leaders and congregations to prayerfully and honestly consider this: “What is the cost to us (to our ministry, our congregation, our relationships, our living faith) if we do not respond to this conflict in a constructive way? Are we willing to pay that cost?”

3. Realize that change and conflict are linked and that both are inevitable in the development of a congregation as an organization.

In his study, *Promise and Peril: Understanding and Managing Change and Conflict in Congregations* (Alban Institute, 2009), David Brubaker pointed out that the hot topics that congregations often fight about are often less important than “the underlying organizational factors or systemic issues” (120). Changes within a congregation’s decision making structures, leadership transition, or worship styles will inevitably bring about tensions, differences, and even conflict within a congregation.

The guidance here is to anticipate that there will be some creative tensions during these periods in a congregation’s life. Therefore, leaders should approach these changes thoughtfully, patiently, and with significant opportunities for communication among a cross-section of your membership. Often when people talk at each other rather than with each other, there is a hardening of the positions and the capacity to approach an adaptive challenge constructively together diminishes.

4. Recognize that engaging differences constructively is holy work on behalf of our culture at this time.

When we consider the amount of polarization in our own culture these days, it becomes a significant task for congregations to model ways for dealing with differences that can foster healing, reconciliation and understanding. In *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, the Quaker Parker Palmer points out five habits that we can cultivate in our religious communities to help us move beyond the disabling effects in our current democracy and to overcome intractable polarization:

1. An understanding that we are all in this together.
2. An appreciation of the value of “otherness.”
3. An ability to hold tension in life-giving ways.
4. A sense of personal voice and agency.
5. A capacity to create community.

Although Palmer is not writing for religious communities per se, I believe that our capacities to provide a spiritual rationale for each of these “habits” and to intentionally

cultivate these as perspectives and practices can connect us to a relevant religious and cultural task in our time.

Can we imagine our religious communities as greenhouses of the spirit that can offer effective, healthy, and vital perspectives and practices on working with and through conflict? Can our congregations be resources not just unto themselves but for the lives, relationships, and neighborhoods around the congregation? These, to me, are the essential questions.

Notes

1. Craig Runde and Tim Flanagan, *Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2007).