

BECOMING A DISCIPLE-MAKING CHURCH

CONFLICT AND COMMUNITY: A TRANSFORMATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

All of us recognize the story of Jesus Christ as wondrous because it is the message that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (1 Corinthians 5:19). We have been given the ministry of reconciliation, that is, the task of sharing this word and this reconciliation with the world. But we also know that such ministry calls us to “a more excellent way” in response to the turmoil of our world, near and far.

God’s Word strengthens and guides us:

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

“If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” (Romans 12:18)

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21)

These and other passages acknowledge the reality of conflict in the world and even within the church. Oftentimes it is not conflict itself that is the problem, but rather how we respond to it. The creation of a board of deacons in Acts 6:1-7 is the story of a multi-cultural conflict—even confrontation—that was rooted in an inequitable distribution of resources within the community. The conflict featured preferential attention to the more familiar, the easier to understand and those who enjoyed more ready access to the apostolic ear. This was a conflict familiar to the world that had found a home within the church.

To their credit and our benefit, the apostles acknowledged the conflict and even went beyond merely ending it or managing it. They listened. And by listening, they empowered those who previously felt left out and unheard. In doing that they acknowledged the legitimacy of those who previously felt insignificant. It is a case study in conflict transformation.

Whether it is within the church or within the community in which the church is located, God has called us to be peacemakers, to be wise as serpents yet harmless as doves. Our neighborhoods and communities are the meeting places of ever more diverse populations, all seeking not only a better material life but the opportunity to celebrate the riches of their cultural identities.

So many things can go wrong in our efforts to reach out to others. Subtle differences in cultural customs and behavior can be fascinating but they can also provide occasions for misunderstanding. To cite just one example, in some cultures looking someone directly in the eye while speaking is considered disrespectful, while in other cultures not to do so is considered suspicious. From such tiny differences hurts can arise and relationships can be distorted, resulting in conflict. When such conflict takes place in the context of a perceived competition for limited resources or the fear of falling behind “them,” communities experience their own particular kind of Cold War. In such settings, the church has an opportunity to create an environment where differences are creatively explored and where people can be trusted to help mediate a conflict or identify those who can.

The Reconciliation Ministries office of National Ministries provides resources to equip churches and individuals to be a “mediating presence” in church and community conflicts, especially where the conflicts involve ethnic or cultural differences. It offers a basic, 14-hour workshop with skills in analyzing and understanding conflict, developing listening capacities that transform relationships and a mediation process that can be adapted to different situations.

– Dwight Lundgren

