



Conflict and Reconciliation in Churches

By Sandra Cobbin, Freelance Trainer and Mediator

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Introduction

In this paper I seek to demonstrate how unhealthy conflict in churches can escalate, leading to broken relationships, shame and hurt. I then explore ways in which conflict can be dealt with in a healthy way, leading to the opportunity for creative and positive results to emerge and to the possibility of reconciliation.

The paper is informed by my experience as a freelance trainer and mediator working with clergy and churches in different denominations who are living with conflict.

The opportunities of conflict in church

At a recent diocesan Continuing Ministerial Development day on time management, 25% of the clergy attending the day were working in a context of serious conflict which was impacting significantly on their emotional wellbeing, effectiveness and sense of confidence in their role. They thought that they needed to be more organised but, whilst this might have been true, they also needed to be equipped to deal differently with the destructive and unhealthy behaviours in the parish because it was those behaviours that were gobbling up their most creative time and energy.

Conflict is part of life and part of church life. Sometimes a church exhibits healthy conflict, which provides opportunity and builds relationships. Sometimes, a church exhibits unhealthy conflict - it escalates, breaking relationships, bringing shame and hurt with devastating consequences for clergy and congregations.

When this happens the temptation is to do whatever we can to move on. However, when we take the opportunity to journey through the conflict, we open up the possibilities of a different future.

Jesus' ministry of reconciliation

The Bible is full of stories about conflict between family members, tribes and other groups. Yet, within the conflict narrative, we find a thread of reconciliation and hope, the opportunity to re-imagine relationships. Jacob meets his brother Esau after a murderous feud has kept them apart for years. He declares "...to see your face is like seeing the face of God.." (Gen 33 v 10). Paul invites Philemon to 're-imagine' his relationship with his estranged servant Onesimus "...that you might have him back, no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother." (Philemon 1 v 15, 16).

Jesus' life and death show how costly reconciliation can be. How much easier might it have been for Jesus to remain in the glory and wonder of Heaven rather than live in the messiness of Earth? How much easier might it have been for Jesus to worship Satan in the wilderness before his own ministry had even begun? How much easier might it have been to let "the cup pass by" in the Garden of Gethsemane?

We are called to bring reconciliation, to a ministry that requires us to stand in the messiness of conflict, to resist the temptation to take quick fix shortcuts. Offering a ministry of reconciliation can mean drinking from a bitter cup as we stand with those in the midst of conflict and invite them to re-imagine the future. Offering a ministry of reconciliation can be costly as you carry the hope of reconciliation modelled in the most costly way by Jesus.

Sweep it under the carpet?

Very often shame and embarrassment accompany conflict in churches. We think we shouldn't fall out and when we do we're not sure how to make sense of it. When a church hasn't learned healthy habits of conflict the instinct is to sort out the disagreement as quickly as possible by:

- Pushing through a change without taking time to address real concerns held by people in the church.
- A difficult party or parties or the clergy leaving the church.
- Pulling back from a difficult decision, things stay as they are.

The quick fix calms the anxiety and emotions, but it doesn't deal with the problems, sweeping them - and the hurts that accompany them - under the proverbial carpet to trip us up later.

Case Study

A vicar wanted to remove some pews at the back of church to make room for coffee and tea after the service.

Unbeknownst to the vicar their predecessor had removed a number of pews at the front of church to make room for a music group. A conflict about the pews emerged with family set against family and friend against friend. The pews were removed, but the conflict was not worked through. Over time it was swept under the carpet. The predecessor left, it appeared the church had moved on.

When the new vicar began to explore the possibility of removing pews at the back of the church, the old conflict re-emerged with the same level of intense emotion. The same factions rapidly re-established themselves. The old conflict had been swept under the carpet, but it hadn't gone away. Because it had been swept under the carpet it wasn't considered an important part of the church's shared story and so the new vicar knew nothing about this chapter in the church's life.

The turmoil that emerged was full of destructive energy and intense emotions were expressed. People in the congregation, on the PCC and in the wider community took up previously held positions and hunkered down for the fight. The conflict absorbed energy, affected relationships and all areas of the church's mission and ministry. The vicar eventually took time off for stress and, after a number of years of this conflict, decided to retire, sooner than planned.

This congregation has a choice – to put in the hard work of facing the conflict with the possibilities of reconciliation or to sweep it under the carpet again and move on.

Unwritten Rule – ‘the way we do things around here’

Churches can get into patterns which, although unspoken and unwritten, become integral to the way the congregation are with each other – ‘the way we do things around here’.

Sometimes patterns emerge in response to a traumatic event. For example, a church whose incumbent went to prison for offences against children got into a pattern of repeated interregna. Each new incumbent stayed for just two or three years before moving on and successive interregna got longer and longer. The sense of betrayal felt by the congregation as a result of the behaviour of the original incumbent meant they found it hard to trust those that followed. Their behaviours towards each new incumbent made it difficult for the new incumbent to settle and eventually each one left. The betrayal was reinforced and so the pattern continued.

The unwritten rules of ‘the way we do things around here’ can become so familiar that they become ‘normal’. One town has two Anglican churches, one built over a century ago as a result of a falling out at the parish church. Even today the two churches don’t work together; “the way we do things around here” is “not with them!”

Case Study

An independent church appointed a minister for their gifts as a caring pastor. After five or six years some in the congregation decided the leader needed to be a gifted preacher. An email to the leadership team expressed frustration with the minister and declared them unsuitable, conversations took place and the conflict grew. Within months the minister had resigned and was looking for another post; the congregation was shocked by their minister leaving so abruptly; and the leadership team felt misunderstood.

Working with the church it became apparent that this was a pattern in their shared story. The previous minister had been appointed for gifts in teaching and preaching but after five or six years had been told they needed to be more pastoral. That minister too sought a post elsewhere.

Like a pendulum this had happened again and again. Unless a mirror is held up to the congregation inviting them to see the pattern and explore the possibility of doing things differently – to re-imagine the future - the pendulum will keep swinging. Minister after minister will be appointed for their gifts until gradually expectations change and they feel they must seek a new post. The minister and congregation carry a sense of failure, the pain of betrayal and broken trust.

Healthy Ways of Dealing with Conflict

There are a number of signs that indicate whether a church has healthy ways of dealing with differences and conflict. Sometimes it is easiest to see these from outside the context. Newly appointed clergy have an opportunity to see them too, before they become part of “the way we do things around here”.

The way decisions are made

Congregations live with low levels of conflict as a matter of the everydayness of living together as the Body of Christ - decisions need to be made, differences need to be accommodated, problems need to be solved.

Congregations might helpfully ask themselves:

- How does the church, especially the PCC, engage with difference and decision making?
- Is disagreement encouraged or squashed?
- Is there an openness to listen to different opinions and ideas, or a reluctance to make space for disagreement?
- Is there a tendency to 'take positions' or to look at the problem together?

Space for disagreement

All too often our usual way of making decisions means the people who are confident with disagreement express their opinions robustly and rigorously, whilst those who don't like confrontation or who don't feel confident in debate remain quiet. However, we can create space for healthy disagreement. This is not a free-for-all and not the old habit of the loudest and strongest voices doing all the talking. Rather, it is a space to listen openly and to speak carefully and honestly. Sometimes the most precious gift I can offer to another is that of listening. And it is often only after I have listened to the other that they are able and willing to listen to me.

When clergy are equipped and confident to create space for disagreement, groups learn to have healthy disagreement that involves as much listening as it does talking, maybe more.

An open and agreed process

There are some elements of decision making that are set by the governance of the organisation (e.g. the need for faculties for decisions about buildings). Other elements of decision making can be shaped. When people understand and have confidence in the way that a decision will be made, they are much more likely to trust the process and engage with the decision making in a constructive way.

To assist with this, church leaders:

- Should be open and clear about what has to happen because of governance and involve others in shaping the wider decision making process.
- Should not assume that a decision making process is obvious - it may be opaque to someone who is familiar with a different organisation, perhaps through their work.
- Should keep returning to the process - where you are, what you've done and what's to come. This helps people to maintain a clear sense of the whole process.

When clergy are equipped and confident to steer clear processes for making decisions, groups can learn to make decisions well.

Clergy are central

The most significant work that I do when working with congregations experiencing conflict is with the clergy. Resourcing clergy with understanding and skills enables them to lead with confidence in a time of conflict and anxiety. Helping them to work on their own levels of anxiety and emotion enables them to remain connected in the messiness of broken relationships.

Resourcing clergy as part of their ongoing development equips and develops them to make the most of tools that reduce the likelihood of escalated conflict. They are also better equipped and confident to lead should conflict escalate so that the hope of reconciliation is not lost in the height of anxiety and emotion.

Opportunities from transition

Churches that exhibit difficult and unhealthy behaviour usually become known by the diocese. A change of clergy provides an opportunity for the diocese to work with the congregation to re-imagine the future and make different choices about how they are with each other and with their clergy.

For example, the Church of Scotland has been using interim ministers in churches with unhealthy habits of conflict. This was in response to deep concerns about pastoral needs of ministers and evidence of broken relationships within churches. Rather than appoint another minister to fill a vacancy in a place of conflict, an interim minister is appointed with the task of engaging the church in changing the way they are with each other.

One of the tools the interim minister uses is that of story telling, inviting the church to tell their story and to identify the patterns, habits and ways of being with each other that have led them to conflict and pain. This gives them an opportunity to come to terms with their history and to re-imagine a different future. The use of storytelling runs alongside the development of practical tools for decision making and communicating, helping congregations develop healthier habits and ways of being with each other in the future.

The use of email

Email is excellent as a way of passing on information widely and quickly. It might seem a statement of the obvious but it is crucial to recognise that email is **not** effective as a way of expressing differences of opinion or view, concerns and emotions. Emails are easy to misunderstand, they invite any number of people into the discussion and take only a moment to send.

Case Study

Working with a church which was in conflict as a result of decisions about services and styles of worship, it didn't take long to realise that communication by email was part of the problem. Email was used to pass information, but also to pass opinion, accusation and blame. Emails were regularly copied to a wide range of people, replies were copied widely too. There was little evidence of 'counting to 10' before email replies were sent. As a result hurtful, personal things were emailed to a wide recipient list. Trust and relationships were quickly eroded; face to face communication between some people had ceased. Email had become **the** way in which people let others know what they thought and felt.

We worked with the vicar and PCC to re-imagine the way that they used email, so that:

- Emails were used for information rather than as a way to express emotion or concerns.
- The 'copy' function became the exception rather than the rule.

- Rather than firing off an angry response to an email that caused offence, hurt or anger, the recipient picked up the phone and sought a conversation with the sender, wherever possible face to face.
- Emails weren't sent in anger; people put a copy of their reply in the 'draft folder' to sleep on it - more often than not they didn't send the email the following day.

After initial resistance (“*I haven't got time to do that*”), the vicar and PCC had a go and quickly saw relationships build, tension reduce and trust increase. By not getting hooked into the ‘reply all’ of emotionally charged emails and by taking responsibility for the emails they sent, the vicar and PCC began to change the way others communicated too. By picking up the phone to talk about issues and concerns, the vicar and PCC created opportunities to explore more fully the concerns of others. The vicar and PCC grew in confidence when talking about difficult issues together and with others, issues were addressed quickly and in private. There was a lot of listening and the level of tension and anxiety reduced rapidly.

Conclusion: Re-imagining the future

I often talk about Lazarus when I'm working with groups or churches experiencing conflict. (John 11 v 1-16). The story of Lazarus is an invitation to re-imagine the future. I wonder whether Lazarus was always known as “*Lazarus, the man who rose from the dead*”? I wonder whether children ran away from him, scared that he was a ghost? I wonder whether Mary and Martha got fed up hearing about the tingly feeling when Jesus brought him back to life? I wonder whether Lazarus defined himself by this experience of death or whether he walked into the re-imagined future Jesus offered him?

A congregation or church very often doesn't want to look at their story of conflict, whether they are living it now or have lived it in the past. Just as the crowd didn't want to open Lazarus' tomb for fear of the stench, perhaps the congregation is afraid of the stench. Congregations and churches have the opportunity to remain defined by the conflict they have experienced, bound by it years after it has happened. Or they can open the tomb, face the fear of the stench, unbind the body and open themselves to the possibility of a re-imagined future.

By recognising, enabling and resourcing clergy for a ministry of reconciliation within our churches and denominations, perhaps there will be more Lazarus stories to tell.

Further Information

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Sandra Cobbin is a freelance trainer and mediator. Sandra works with church leaders and congregations living with conflict and trains leaders in how to lead in times of conflict. She also provides management and leadership training to church and business leaders, working with a number of Dioceses in the Church of England. She is a Transition Coach for new Diocesan Bishops and an Archbishops' Reviewer for the Bishops' MDR scheme

Further Resources

Websites:

Bridge Builders: www.bbministries.org.uk

Church of Scotland: www.placeforhope.org.uk

Faith in Conflict Conference, February 2013: www.faithinconflict.com

Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution: <http://www.cedr.com/>

Books:

How to Learn through Conflict, by Colin Patterson, Grove Series

The Little Book of Circle Processes, by Kay Pranis, Good Books www.GoodBooks.com

Never Call Them Jerks – Healthy Responses to Difficult People, by Arthur Paul Boers, The Alban Institute www.albaninstitute.com