



Pastoral Leadership in Conflicted Congregations

MARY MILLER BRUEGGEMANN

United Church of Christ, Decatur, Georgia

These are difficult times for pastors, especially for those women and men working in congregations where conflict is more apparent than mission or where conflict is more compelling than faith. Churches in conflict are of deep concern to those who carry leadership responsibilities in the church.

This paper reflects on my work as an interim pastor in more than a dozen parish situations from small rural congregations of fifty to large suburban congregations of seventeen hundred people. Rather than a detailed study of the growing field of conflict management, I offer reflections on my experiences, which I take to be fairly typical. The growing body of knowledge concerning interim ministry and conflict resolution is of tremendous help to leaders of congregations. However, my focus is on experience after that theoretical work is done.

I

The reasons for the conflict in churches vary with each local congregation. However, there are some things which all of us have in common.

1. There is among us a deep and frightening breakdown of authority both in society and in the church. “Post-modernism” is here, and none of us is as sure about things as we all once were. If we are honest, we cannot escape this reality which is all around us. I may think I know what is right and true, but not everyone will agree with me even if I am entrusted with formal authority. And often my “sureness” in the exercise of authority makes for more conflict rather than resolution.

2. We also live in a society in which secular interests are far greater than they

were even twenty years ago. The church simply does not carry the authority in a community that it once did. This is especially true in urban contexts and increasingly true in rural areas of our country as well.

3. People are living lives of enormous hurt and pain—often unarticulated and overlaid by cultural expectations of being supermen and -women. And the informal modes whereby such hurt was processed in the past often no longer exist. No one likes to talk about their personal pain—loss of job, or a marriage that is no longer covenantal, or children not able to cope in a culture of drugs and guns. The shame and embarrassment of “failure” produces denial, which only makes us more intransigent. So how does an interim pastor or permanent pastor work in situations of conflict?

There is no magic, no panacea or quick remedy, and sometimes the change in the life of a

congregation moves at a very slow pace. The pastor cannot play god, i.e., cannot impose remedies or solutions. Such an attempt at leadership will not work—never has in the life of the church! Getting clear that one is not the savior helps one begin in a healthy place. It saves on burn-out, stress, and a host of other ills. It also keeps one from moving the center of the conflict to oneself and one's leadership.

II

I want to suggest four specific ways in which a pastor may help a conflicted congregation move toward health and greater faithfulness. They are: (1) listening, (2) worship, (3) integrity, and (4) boundaries.

Listening

Genuinely hearing another human being is one of the most grace-filled acts one can give. Listen to all the voices. There is often a cacophony of them. One learns to listen to the loud and the soft ones, to the leadership voices and to the voices of those unable to attend church. You go and listen! Take seriously the ministry of listening. Few other people in our culture really listen these days. And when people are hurting, listening to the pain lifts and heals. In psychotherapy we pay someone to listen. In the church, what a gift we can give others by genuinely listening to what the congregation and its disparate voices are saying. It may or may not seem to you to be related to present circumstance. But do not judge too quickly. A death in the family fifteen years ago may be the power for anger around an issue which to you seems to be completely unrelated. The pastor may not know what connects the old hurt and the present issue. Indeed, the person who hurts may not know either. But listen and you may learn.

Not many pastors are able to visit in the homes of parishioners in these fast-paced days when people live miles and miles from the church and work makes for long hours away from home. My experience is that the lack of such calls is serious, both to the congregation and to the pastor. In every conflicted parish I have worked in, I have made visiting members of the church in their homes a major priority. I go to listen. Often, by the end of the first week of an interim, the

word is out. "Grapevines" in the parish are alive and well! Some call and ask me to come and visit. And the listening continues. Some will be shy and unable to ask. Call anyway. Rarely, if ever, have I felt such an unrequested call to be intrusive, unwanted, or not needed.

It is helpful to listen during all the committee meetings, as well as the meetings of the trustees, elders, and deacons. That does not mean one does not speak or be involved with the issues and concerns. But listening below the surface is of utmost importance in conflicted congregations. No forward movement can happen until people can untangle themselves and hear again the grace of God at work in their lives and in the world.

Listen to the janitor, the church secretary, the director of Christian education, the nursery school teacher. A church staff which must function in a congregation where conflict is the most apparent objective is a staff working under great stress. So listen to their concerns even though you may, at first, see them as part of the problem. Churches do not have a good track record in their personnel procedures!

In one church setting where I was pastor, it did not take long to see that the church

secretary was “the boss.” Several pastors had been through the mill. The church was divided between those who loved “Elaine” and those who greatly disliked and feared “Elaine.” She was a charter member of the church and had “given her life” to that congregation. It was her “child.” Though she was past retirement, the governing body would not deal with the issues she presented in the conflicted situation. Her termination was just too hot to handle. Listening, I learned that in the thirty years she had worked there, the church had never put her on the social security rolls. She had deep anger and resentment at her “child.” Resolution came when she retired with a large monetary gift from the congregation. She came to her own retirement party dressed all in black. Her controlling rage evaporated into delight at the surprising concrete gesture of generosity. Neither she nor the church could resist the “material” response to her fearful resentment.

Worship

It is sometimes the case that in churches which are conflicted, worship is either ignored as crucial to the ecology of the congregation and not taken seriously, or it becomes the battleground for the fight. In either case it is misused and becomes idolatrous, a source of great destructiveness. No conflict resolution can take place until worship becomes central to the life of the congregation and is alive, thoughtful, and intentional for all members of the church. Thus it becomes essential for the pastor, who is the major worship leader, to give time and energy to this part of the church’s life. If liturgy is, by definition, derived out of the life of the people, careful thought and collegial planning needs to be done.

Newness in worship can begin by learning about the past history of worship in the parish. What have been the strengths and weaknesses in past practice? How have music and art played a part in the development of the congregation’s life? Have lay leaders been involved before? Is the sanctuary itself in good order?

Focusing on ways to strengthen this important part of the life of the church begins in the pastor’s work with the staff and worship committee.

Careful planning with the lay leaders who have been given responsibility for worship speaks volumes about how the pastor values worship. It becomes more important than who said what to whom last week! Careful choice of hymns using inclusive language, well-written and imaginative prayers, a liturgy that moves and does not stagnate, a sermon well-crafted, textual, and delivered with sensitivity for the listening congregation are all ways in which worship can be planned to the glory of God and to the missional enhancement of the parish.

Preaching is central to the liturgy in my own tradition. However, I do not think it is helpful in preaching to focus upon the present situation in the church. Such concrete reference is not necessary, because the present situation is already being processed through the liturgy and members of the worshipping community are well aware of it. Our task is to preach the gospel. Most often in conflicted congregations there is very little “good news” to speak about. Thus the focus is the text of the day, away from the immediacy of the trouble. How has the text moved you in recent weeks? Stay with it as you move around and do the other tasks of ministry. Let the text itself speak. I am aware of the hermeneutical moves a preacher must make in preaching. But I find most congregations to know little of the biblical story. Staying close to the text is a powerful moment both for the preacher and for a congregation closed in on its own problems. The

congregation will not miss the connection, say, between David and his struggle with power issues and their own struggle with power issues. The congregation will not miss the connection between the failure of the disciples of Jesus to understand fully the Messiah and their own failures in the present time. Obviously, one may use illustrations, but make their setting somewhere beyond the local city limits!

Inclusive language can sometimes be a cause for conflict, but it can also empower women and men toward new and fresh ways of living, if done in grace and love. A pastor who includes all people in written prayers, without needing explicitly to call attention to it, is using a theology which is whole and empowering for all. Hymns such as “Rise Up O Men of God” and “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind”—two old favorites—are really quite divisive and do not build up the community. There are wonderful fresh resources now available. Putting new resources to work moves everyone past their old proprietary claims. Introducing new hymns in a congregation is an art and should be done with care.

Integrity

It may be surprising that I name this most important ingredient of ministry in this essay. However, in conflicted congregations integrity is rarely present. Tempers flare, anger deepens, lines are drawn, and people begin to act in ways that are unbelievable and destructive. Therefore, the pastor must walk carefully and with great integrity—not only personal integrity but also integrity in the processes of sharing information and making decisions. The pastor must work to safeguard procedures that give people confidence in the decisions. If necessary, go overboard

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in being careful that gossip does not pass through your office. Work with each committee—no matter how inept you may feel the work is. Work with integrity.

Let me give an example. The conflict may be over the music program. Where is it appropriate to discuss future plans about the music? Not in the “House and Grounds” committee. If members of that committee have a concern about the music, encourage them to state it clearly in a letter to those in charge of music. It is not necessary for the pastor to be the conduit. Church members can be helped to work with integrity as they learn intentional ways in which one’s concerns can be given.

Probably the most important area for integrity, however, is in conversation regarding the former pastor. It simply is not helpful for the pastor to be a part of “putting down” colleagues. You may think that the former pastor needs to be censured, but that is not your job. It is especially important for interim pastors to remember that they have engaged in ministry in a specific congregation in order to lead that parish into God’s mission to a needy world. Other parts of the institutional church than this parish have the burden of caring for ministers who have done harm to others. For us to judge and to be a part of “passing sentence” is unethical and not what we were called to do.

Boundaries

My last observation about ministry in conflicted congregations arises from heeding the wisdom of psychotherapists about situations which appear to be dysfunctional. Remembering the boundaries within which we work helps provide clarity in difficult situations. One of the first

tasks in taking a specific call to a local church is clarity about the job description—both for the pastor and the congregation. It may simply be a listing of the tasks which the pastor has agreed to do. The covenant/contract with the congregation affirms that they will support the pastor in his or her work with prayer, the giving of time and talent, and financial support. Such an initial understanding is important because it begins to set the boundaries of the work.

It will also be helpful to set boundaries in relation to the committees and boards of the church. The pastor may help the chairperson of a committee or board set the agenda for the meeting, an agenda which will help clarify the decisions to be made. But the committee or board members are the deciders. Supporting the various committees as they do their own work, rather than taking it over, becomes a pastoral gift to the lay leaders. When the pastor does the work of a committee, the boundaries are crossed over, and there is confusion about roles.

The opposite is also true. The congregation needs to learn to accept what is properly the role and work of the pastor. Clarity about that gives the pastor authority to speak and work without being or appearing to be authoritarian. Often, in churches where conflict is a daily occurrence, roles have gotten blurred. It may mean that no one is properly attending to business or that every one is trying to do another's job. Asking about the boundaries of the various committees and how they function best becomes a strategy for empowering lay leadership.

In one church setting where I worked, the kitchen had become a battleground between the trustees and the women's guild. The women were the primary users and provided funds to buy new equipment, but the trustees saw it as their job to decide on what was needed. It does not take much imagination to play out the scene, especially if "the play" has been going on for some time. It is not hard to imagine that the power struggle could pull others in the church, including the pastor, into the battle. Everyone found it easy to take sides. Helping the two groups resolve the conflict means beginning with clarity about the boundaries. Who owns the responsibility for equipping the church? How do they consult with others in the purchase of new equipment? Would it be helpful to have women on the board of trustees next year? Is it possible to set up a task force for this particular job? To whom do they report? When the situation is handled with such intentionality, it becomes a learning experience for people and helps them in other tasks which become points of tension.

Clarity about boundaries can also help in the supervision of other staff. To whom are staff members responsible? Who does the day-to-day supervision? How can the education committee give input to the job description of the director of Christian education when he or she is supervised by the pastor? All of these can become places where the pastor can lead with grace, rather than with a heavy hand.

It has often taken years for a local congregation to move to open conflict. It may take years for the tangled web of hidden destructive habits to become undone. My sense is that no one likes to live in such conflict, and they yearn for the fireworks or the espionage to end. It does take a variety of skills to live out the vocation of ministry in such a setting. It is a calling by God to be in such ministry. Listening, careful preparation for worship, working with integrity, and learning to set boundaries both for the pastor and the congregation become ways to begin that ministry. It is possible to move from those perspectives to a host of other ways to work in conflict resolution. These four steps are only a beginning. I do not believe, however, that they can be overlooked.

The large issues of secularism and pluralism will be around for a long time. In the midst of them, the pastor can be intentional about the details of congregational infrastructure. While such details seem modest, they are the indispensable means whereby a parish can be responsibly engaged in larger missional issues.