

Facing tensions and conflict in the church.

We are all different – by divine design: in Creation and by spiritual gift.

We are all finite – intended to complement one another in community, work together in teams, give and receive in a world of grace.

We are all also fallen – and often more selfish and culturally blinkered than we might imagine. We should not be surprised, then, when tensions (and even conflicts!) arise in church life. A disagreement is not a disaster!

The church is not ‘heaven on earth’ and any expectation that the Christian life will be conflict-free is quite unrealistic. The church is where we learn to deal with conflict and grow through tensions so that we are able to be humble and effective peacemakers at home and in society – while together celebrating what it means to be a community of reconciliation through the power of the Cross. Stirring conflict and trying to avoid it completely are equally misguided. We need not fear disagreement, and ‘managing church life’ in an attempt to eliminate the expression of contrary opinions is often a sign of insecure (and therefore controlling) leadership that stunts the growth of the church as a community.

Learning about other people (personality, gender, culture) is part of the maturing process. And we have a gospel! The Good News is that through Jesus, the tide of human history has turned and we have been set free to become mature ‘new creation’ people, who are being fitted for the new universe where God is evidently King. We have been declared ‘in the right’ with God and are growing towards being totally at home in righteousness. Amazingly, we also get to represent and advance God’s kingdom, while still being a work in progress! We don’t always get it right, but we know what to do when we get it wrong. Repentance and forgiveness are essential common currency among the people of God.

Rather than fearing or avoiding conflict, then, we shall explore how Jesus’ teaching enables us to see times of tension as opportunities for growth – both personally and as communities – as those who are committed to the ‘message and ministry of reconciliation’ (see 2 Cor 5).

Jesus’ teaching:

Matthew 5:9 Peace-makers, not just peace-keepers. (A cemetery: peaceful but hardly full of life!)

Matthew 5:23-24 Other side of Mark 11:25. Restored relationships more important than...

Matthew 7:1-5 Not judging out of fear – or judging the Jesus way?

Matthew 7:24-27 Yes – Jesus means us to *do* what he says!

Matthew 18:15-17 Don’t think we know better than Jesus. A commitment to obey aids listening!

When two people fight, they can’t both be right. (They can both be wrong, of course!)

James 4:1-10 – humility, grace and prayer; **Galatians 6:1-2**; **Romans 14:1-15:7**; **James 3:17-18**

“Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”

Questions for reflection or discussion

In your group (choose your favourite gospel)

- 1 What are some of the most common things that cause conflict in churches? Select a sample or two and consider what approach you would want to take in the light of Jesus' teaching.
- 2 Has anyone ever had the courage to confront you gently and quietly about something you had done wrong? What impact did that experience have on you?
- 3 How applicable to conflict resolution *outside* the church are the principles of Jesus' teaching? In what ways do you think you could have the blessing of being a peacemaker? How do you think a practical 'ministry of reconciliation' might demonstrate and recommend the 'message of reconciliation'?
- 4 Which is easier to deal with: conflicts you are involved in or mediating in other people's conflicts? How can the one help you learn how to deal with the other?

Before your leave

you may want to think about the following questions or make use of the availability of help.

- 1 What is your response to conflict situations? Are you more inclined to 'fight' or 'flight'? How would you want Jesus' teaching to shape your reactions in the future?
- 2 Has the Bible's teaching shone light on experiences from your past? If the Holy Spirit has kindly convicted you of anything, it can be put right with God right now. (You may find it helpful to meditate on 1 John 1:5 – 2:2.) Is there anything you can do to make it right with other people?
- 3 Are there conflicts that you are currently facing – or have recently gone through?
 - In what ways are you able to see yourself as part of the problem?
 - How do you think you can be part of the solution?
 - How would you hope to grow through this conflict experience?
- 4 If there is an unresolved conflict or some action you think you could or should take to restore relationships with other people, you may find it helpful to talk this over with someone you trust.
- 5 Similarly, if you are carrying scars from past or recent conflict, it may be helpful to talk them over and together to bring them to the Lord for healing and restoration.

Suggested reading:

Colin Patterson, *How to Learn through Conflict* (Grove Pastoral Series, 2003/2008)

This very practical and insightful book contains suggestions for further reading and other resources.

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