

Handling conflict within the congregation

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It is truly heartbreaking when people you love (your congregation) are fighting. It is really hard not to take sides. What I would ask is what else is going on for this congregation? How are you pulling together in mission and service? How active are you in your neighborhood and the world? What kind of projects are you involved with? When our congregation went through similar issues of bickering and name calling it was because we were totally focused inward (we were building a new church building) and our outreach inadvertently fell by the wayside. Have you ever noticed how children bicker when they are bored... give them a task where they have to work together, enjoy what they are doing and feel good about themselves and suddenly the issue diminishes and often disappears.. If you are indeed *way* busy in areas of outreach thenI f the division is around a specific social issue... like inclusion or exclusion .. education might be also helpful. People fear what they do not understand or are unfamiliar with. If it is around what can or can not happen within the walls of your church... think about what Jesus might have voted... Above all, remember that this division is basically around some kind of fear....(Fear of lack of control or lack of power?) This is a time not to take sides but use your compassion... NOT AN EASY THING!

If this is of any comfort, I don't think that there is a church anywhere that has not experienced these behaviors and to tell you the truth, unfortunately, it is within churches that the most unchristian behavior can occur. There is a struggle within my own church at the moment, and unfortunately I cannot be objective because the conflict is between our two different church services and my heart is with the contemporary service, which seems to take a back seat to everything else and we are struggling to get our attendance up. Most of the congregation is older and resistant.

Yes, most churches do experience divisive issues. Sometimes we're not even sure where they come from – they just creep into the fabric of the church life, sapping vitality and strength. It is very hard to remain neutral during these times (especially if they involve the pastor). I saw (and see) my role as listening. I only passed on information to the pastor if I felt it was important. Otherwise I just became a sounding board. One thing I have deeply appreciated with our current staff is the ability to vent and let off steam about issues, people, whatever, without fear of condemnation. I have always tried to cultivate that safe zone for the pastors I have worked for, as well as staff members. While it is hard, perhaps the best gift you can provide is to be a safe place for people to discuss how they feel without passing judgment or taking sides, while encouraging them to remember that what they believe is true for them (at the moment) and others may hold different truths – not always bad, just different. I know it is difficult to watch members leave (or feel they have to leave). But we cannot make them stay. We can only keep open lines of communication so that if they so choose, they may feel free to return. My prayers are with you. I hope Linking Hands is a safe place for you to vent and express your feelings so that you can continue to be God's light to your congregation and your fellow staff members.

I can empathize with dealing with the struggling church. The church I work and attend was the victim of an arson fire two years ago. This spring we had the vote to decide if we rebuild within the granite walls downtown (no green space no parking) or begin again at a greensite. People came out of the woodwork to vote and in the two days prior to the vote there was a media blitz in the local newspaper by the "downtown voters." Only 5 votes separated the outcome and downtown won. There are lots of hard feelings, people leaving, accusations....it's a mess. I can understand how Anonymous is feeling. This has not been a pleasant place to work for the past two years (office in another building and not harmed by the fire.) I felt had to be very careful not to express my views on rebuilding - though I did favor the new site. Now it is my job to embrace the old site and reassure people that it will work "if we all pull together." Tempers have calmed down a little bit but it is still very difficult. It didn't help that we had 3 pastors in these two years. We have lost members, though not officially off the records. Our attendance is down (maybe not just for summer). We are currently meeting with another congregation and it is hoped when our fellowship area is completed (before the sanctuary) we can again worship as one group. Maybe that will help. Anonymous, please remember that it's not your job to "fix the situation." You can empathize with both sides but you are within your right to say, "this is a difficult situation but it is something I don't feel is my place (is right to) discuss." however you want to word it. Try to distance yourself as much as you can. Hang in there and trust that God will help you through it. God Bless

We have potentially explosive situations and people also, this to is my first ministry in being a church secretary; I find asking God for His guidance and wisdom in what truly is important and what is of secondary importance. As much as we secretaries would like to be fixers and have all the right answers, we aren't, we can't be..... nor do I believe God wants us to be. I feel He wants us to speak in love even if sometimes it hurts. I find just listening to their concerns completely before I respond; 8 out of 10 times people just want to be heard out and understood, they want to feel that their opinion matters (and it does) and someone cares about them and their opinions. If that isn't enough then I try to defuse the situation by helping them to figure out what it is they are really mad at by asking: Is that what you are really upset over? How did that make you feel? How do you think that made them feel? What is it you would like to see happen? How do you think you can do achieve that and still feel good about yourself?, etc. Having people think thru their thoughts before reacting is key. Try not to take things personally, and *Don't* pass on what others say that is negative or stinking thinking (not saying you do). It is your wittiness to others that will set the stage of proper behavior and conduct. No, it will not happen overnight, but with God's help and your prayers along with ours, it will not be long before you see Him working in their lives and your :) Hope this helps and keep up the great ministry your doing, your where God can use you., be strong, keep the faith and know I'm praying for you. Have a blessed week.

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My heart and prayers go out to you. You are feeling pain from a situation you can not control. Remember prayer of course, but remember to we are not in control. Those who are not behaving in a Christian manner...well hopefully it will dawn on them before they do too much damage. Pray for them. Has the pastor addressed this unchristian behavior in a sermon to the congregation? Some times that stirs the fire and sometimes it really makes people sit back and think. I really feel for you. I have been in similar situations with other churches (including the one I belong too). Remember too, everyone has a right to believe what they want to believe – but unchristian behavior is not tolerated in my book. I have been known to say as much to some – not recommended. However, remember these famous word (when you are hurting and at your wit's end) "Father, forgive them, for they no not what they do."

Our church has adopted making all decisions by consensus using the following model. That way there is never a "Yes" and "No" vote. Discussion continues until a solution is brought forth that all can support - even though some may have come to a different conclusion as an individual. The Holy Spirit has a valuable role in this process.

Decision-Making by Consensus: A Model for Corporate Discernment

By Bishop Davis J. Lawson

1. One needs good data, basic factual information, identification of alternatives and possibilities.
2. Insist that all categories be kept soft in order that playfulness and creativity may be present and contribute to the process.
3. Maintain holy indifference to the outcome; lay aside all biases, prejudices; be willing to leave the outcome to God's direction and be obedient to the results.
4. Maintain a community and climate of worship.
5. Ask and respond to: Where have you sensed God's benediction in what we have been about?
6. Spend time in reflection, perhaps with a Scripture passage, seeking to listen to God's intimations in the future, hints of God's direction.
7. Share with the faith community what you have heard/seen/felt in your reflection time. Dialogue about what has been reported. Avoid debating for there is no right or wrong, win or lose, but rather a desire to listen to God. Frequently, insight and wisdom come in the dialogical space with a group.
8. Humility is crucial. Each one must be constantly aware that God may have spoken the definitive word to another person.
9. Sometimes silence is how the Christian community moves ahead.
10. Pause from time to time and ask: "God, are you trying to say anything to us? Are we missing anything here?"
11. Remember holy (sacred) indifference to the outcome. Be willing to receive wisdom or direction even if it does not fit your strong desires or decisions.
12. When agreement is reached, directions, plans, commitments are all offered to God. Sometimes the question: "Are we ready to offer this to God?" is helpful.

Coming to a Consensus Decision

Test the team for readiness to make a decision

- a. Does anyone need to discuss this matter further?
- b. Are there any additional questions?
2. Test the team for consensus
 - a. Is there anyone unable to support a decision to _____?
3. If the answer to #2 is no, then proceed with a statement of consensus:
 - a. Then let it be noted that the team has reached a decision to _____.
4. If the answer to #2 is yes, then:
 - a. Invite persons who are unable to support the decision to express their concerns.
 - b. Re-open the conversation as a team, if necessary.
5. Return to #1. If the answer to #2 is still no, then proceed with the following:
 - a. If a significant majority of the team is in support of the decision, those who may be unable to support it can be asked: "Would you be willing to allow the team to move forward with this decision at this time while acknowledging your reservations?" If the answer is yes, then the team may choose to move ahead. If no, then the team should delay decision-making until another time, inviting all participants to be in prayer until then.
 - b. If there is a general lack of consensus about direction, then the team should delay decision-making until another time, inviting all participants to be in prayer until then.
6. If a team finds it difficult to come to consensus on a decision, they may chose to entrust the decision to the hands of a smaller number of members on the team.