



Northwestern Minnesota Synod

## Connections



Connecting the Congregational, Synodical, and Churchwide Expressions of the ELCA

### Healthy congregations manage conflicts

By Bishop Larry Wohlrabe

If someone asks how many conflicted congregations we have in the synod, what they really wants to know is: How many churches aren't managing their conflict well?

On any given day the Northwestern Minnesota Synod does have some congregations that have, for a time, lost the ability to manage conflict in their midst. Conflict is thwarting God's mission.

This is the fifth in a series of articles on the marks of healthy congregations. Bishop Larry encourages congregation councils or other parish leadership groups to use these articles for their opening devotions.

How can you tell if your congregation is no longer managing a conflict well? Here are some symptoms:

- People vehemently deny that any conflict exists
- Members stop listening carefully to one another
- Persons withdraw their presence, withhold their support, issue ultimatums.
- Blame gets focused on a scapegoat, often the pastor
- People think less reflectively, less imaginatively
- Folks start choosing up sides
- Secrets are kept, clandestine meetings are held, anonymous letters are written, communication breaks down
- People stop taking responsibility for themselves
- Quick fixes are sought
- Members gossip about one another or "triangulate"—bringing in a third party rather than going directly to the person who troubles them

Conflict run amok damages relationships within the Body of Christ, and that in itself is tragic enough. What's even worse is that unmanaged conflict derails the congregation's ability to move forward in God's mission. Rather than walking faithfully and purpose-fully behind their Lord toward God's gracious future, members of the church get sidetracked.

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Fortunately, the vast majority of our congregations are not paralyzed by unmanaged conflict. Most churches have learned how to deal with conflict in the course of their common life. How do they do it?

Peter Steinke, in his *Creating Healthy Congregations* study guide, speaks of three characteristics shared by churches that possess a sense of coherence that allows them to manage conflict.

- **Meaningfulness.** Church members have a sense of purpose and are committed to it. They take up the challenges that come to them and shape their destiny under God.
- **Comprehensibility.** Folks have a framework for making sense of what is happening. Healthy interaction and clear communication are taken for granted. People see change as natural. Decisions are made on the basis of clarity, not necessarily certainty.
- **Manageability.** Church folk don't act like victims or complain about how unfairly they have been treated. They recognize the gifts and tools available to them, and they respond thoughtfully to the challenges that confront them.

Let me add two more characteristics:

- **Forgiveness.** When we gather weekly to begin our worship, it is not by accident that we start by confessing our sin to one another and to God. We dare to speak these words only because we know God has an answer to offer us: *I declare unto you the entire forgiveness of all your sins, for Jesus' sake.* People who live within that confession-absolution rhythm always have the best resource for managing conflict.
- **Preparedness.** Healthy congregations expect that they will occasionally encounter sharp disagreements. Just as they keep their liability insurance up to date and their fire extinguishers recharged, they have a conflict management plan "in place." They cultivate leaders who know how to take stands and stay connected with others. They work with clear guidelines and policies. They have functioning Mutual Ministry Committees. They read and practice Matthew 18:15-20 routinely. They ask their leaders to go through *Healthy Congregations* training.

#### Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Recall a time when you or your congregation was involved in "conflict run amok." How did it start? What happened? What resulted from the conflict situation? How did it end? What did you learn?
2. Recall a time when you or your congregation experienced a well-managed conflict situation. Ask yourself the same set of questions under #2 above.