

Ministry Education in Context



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“Conflict in the Parish” by Korey Finstad, PLTS Intern at First Lutheran in Glenville, MN

Like in a suspense movie when the music is getting fast, you know it’s coming. It is beyond your field of vision, but lurking somewhere: conflict in the parish. If you are not currently managing some conflict, you will sometime in the future. It is unavoidable, for wherever you have two people, they are going to disagree on something. Because of our positions as pastors or pastors to be, we will be (and are) drawn into it, whether as participant or mediator.

The trick that helps me the most when I get into a conflict with someone is to try to understand where the other person is coming from. It may be really tempting to think that they are just ignorant or mean. (They must be crazy to think that *I’m* wrong, right!?). Are the two parties in the conflict both working with the same information? What is the reasoning for them to come to that conclusion? This may also bring to light the real source of conflict if it is something other than the issue or behavior at hand, which is often the case.

Likely the disagreement will come not because of a difference in interpretation, but in the difference of opinion on what’s important. Both individuals understand the situation the same, but have different ideas as to what should be done. I find that when there is a conflict like this, especially if it is a big one, that both sides are often in some way “correct”. Things are rarely just black and white, and with so much grey area, it is easy to see how two opposing opinions can both be, in some way, correct. To use an example that we all probably have experience with; some people want to try a more contemporary worship style while others only want the traditional LBW services. Both sides are “right” for wanting the service in a way that is most meaningful for them.

Understanding why a person or group thinks the way they do, and understanding that there is some correctness in their opinion, doesn’t solve the conflict, but it can help us to behave in a way that helps to manage it. Instead of dealing with an “ignorant fool” who just enjoys making our lives difficult, we see someone who has a valid opinion, albeit different from mine. This person may even be someone from whom we could learn.

Other things that are good to keep in mind are to use “I” statements instead of “you” statements and not to use generalizations such as “everyone thinks so.” It is also good to keep our discussions focused on the issue or behavior at hand and not allow it to be an attack on an individual or group. Another good conflict management tool is to use words that describe the situation rather than words that evaluate it.

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Again, these don't solve the conflict, but they help to generate an atmosphere in which the conflict may be managed. It helps to calm the anger and frustration that so often are brought up. It allows each person the confidence of knowing that their opinion has been listened to and taken seriously. Without the need to defend themselves, they may open up to other possibilities. This allows them to come to the table and have an open and honest conversation. Instead of being pitted against each other, the two sides work together for the best solution.

This advice is probably not new for you, but it is what helps me, and we can't ever be over-prepared for managing conflict. I hope that it may be helpful to you.

“Issues of Conflict Management in the Congregation” by Dennis Everson, Associ. Director of Contextual Education, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.”
(Matthew 18:15)

It is clear from these words that Jesus knew that His followers would experience conflict. With these words and those that follow, He also gave us the basic principles of conflict management. Many are surprised and often immobilized when they experience conflict in the church. It has been said, one Christian equals a theologian, two Christians equal a congregation and three Christians equal conflict.

While this may be incapacitating, for many it is the reality we face in the church. Of course the church is not unique in this regard as witnessed by the world around – ie. violence, wars, courts and prisons. Yet we seem to believe that it should not be so in our congregations. The song “They Will Know We are Christians by Our Love” is the ideal we want to embody.

So how can we reconcile our differences and manage our conflicts in a manner consistent with our ideals and hopes for peaceable resolutions? Again Jesus' words are wise counsel for attempting such resolutions. The first advice He gives is, do something. I have heard people say, “I'm sure if I ignore this it will go away.” Avoiding conflict is always a strong instinct for most of us. Sometimes it may be a wise strategy. Give him/them enough rope and they'll hang themselves. If one takes time to reflect and avoid knee jerk reactions we may in fact minimize the tensions. This is doing something. Wise restraint is doing something. But when Jesus says, “Go and discuss this alone together,” He is giving us some cardinal points in facing conflict.

Once we have decided to do something, the task is to begin at the simplest level. Get together with the individual alone. I also believe that word “go,” supports going to the other person's turf. Ask if you can come to their farm or office or home. Get away from the pastor's office or the church property – ie. symbols of the pastor's office. Then listen carefully. Let the person speak freely about their disappointment or disagreement.

Once a clear understanding has been established give as honest an accounting as you can. If the conflict persists, the next steps our Lord supports may be necessary. This could involve inviting the aggrieved party to share the complaint with a member of the church council or even with the council as a whole. Usually by this time the conflict is diffused or reconciliation may include apologies in the presence of others.

If not, then you have done what you can and one has to accept that agreement may be impossible. Even then we can agree to disagree and try to continue to work together.

If disagreements persist again we should not be surprised. Human nature and systems theorists tell us that some conflicts may prove intractable. Even in such cases we still have choices which can help alleviate the tensions. Attitude becomes crucial in such situations. The images we work with can be determinative in our survival.

The image of alligators has been popular in describing such impasses. This is an image filled with emotional overtones. Maliciousness, mercilessness, relentless destruction all come to mind. I'd like to support something less sinister. I use the image of the pac-man syndrome. Sometimes folks just like to chew on things. This helps me keep the play impulse in mind. If others like to chew on things let them. We have better things to do.

This may prove futile in the long run. Yet at that stage if folks want to harbor resentment and animosity against you it may be best to just ignore them. This may ultimately be that non-anxious presence that Friedmann encourages us to envision for ourselves. Maybe old Solomon was right when he said, “A kind word turneth away much wrath.” (Prov. 15:1)

Candidacy Information

The ELCA Candidacy Coordinators for PLTS and Luther will be forwarding approval essay instructions and questions from the Division for Ministry in May or early June. These will be mailed to your present internship site. If you will be leaving your internship site prior to the end of May 2004, please send your change of address and its effective date to the respective Contextual Education Office and ELCA Candidacy Coordinator for your school. The approval essays will be due in your synod office by September 1, 2004.

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Just for fun, the CLI office collected samples of internship projects from the 2002-2003 internship class. As expected, those received were very diverse and creative and covered a wide range of needs that a church might have. Are you stuck in thinking about what you might do for your internship project? Are you looking for a quick way to get some ideas for projects or ministry ideas you might try on internship or in your future ministry? If so, check out the list below:

“Reel to Real” Bible study

“Whistleblowers” Bible study

“Being Christian in the world” Bible study

Lenten Journey Devotional

Support group for caregivers and family members of people with memory loss illnesses

Co-host of “The Coffee Crew” - a morning “drive time” radio show

Continuing education for the parish musicians

Creating a Congregational Policy and Procedure Manual

“Faith, Family, and Foundations Workshop”

ACT/Neighbor-to-Neighbor Emergency Services List

Puppet ministry

Developing lay leadership

Exploring a congregation’s vision and organizational structure

“CrossConnections” - a spiritual gifts inventory

“Children’s Memorial Service”

Visiting similar congregations and interviewing pastors

This was just to whet your appetite! More information about these projects is available on the CLI website at http://plts.luthersem.edu/cli/internship/handbook/project_ideas.asp May all your projects and ministries reflect the amazing love and grace of Jesus Christ!

Blessed Lenten Season from the Contextual Leadership Initiative faculty and staff...

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Randy Nelson

Mary Beth Weaver

Laure Schwartz

Troy Stack-Nelson

Dennis Everson

DanaLee Ommen

Julé Ballinger

March Issue Topics

- What’s new with the Contextual Leadership Initiative?