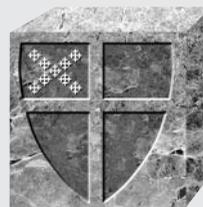


VESTRY PAPERS

To Encourage and Guide Those Called by God to Lead Episcopal Congregations



CORNERSTONE
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FOUNDATION

Elephants in the Sanctuary

by Ward Richards

Conflict. It's inevitable. It occurs every day, in every facet of our lives. And as anyone who has served on a vestry or in any other leadership position in a parish can attest, congregations are not immune.

The word "conflict" often evokes negative images of bickering, power struggles and infighting. Responding to conflict in unhealthy ways can result in our churches becoming a source of stress and disillusionment rather than solace and peace.

On the other hand, when parish leaders embrace conflict and approach it with the recognition that we are called to a common mission as a Christian community, tremendous opportunities arise for spiritual growth and unification.

Resolving conflict begins with an awareness that people generally respond to it in one or more of the following ways: **Avoidance** — ignoring it in the hope that it will go away; **Force** — making others agree to one's position regardless of the consequences; **Accommodation** — repeatedly giving in to the other person's demands; **Compromise** — both persons give up certain parts of their respective positions; or **Problem solving** — collaboration and brainstorming options to address the underlying interests of those in conflict.

Trying to completely avoid conflict can often be as harmful as using aggressive means, because wholeness within a community and

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Skeletons in the Sacristy

by Lindsay Hardin Freeman

Skeletons in the sacristy? We have one — figuratively, at least — in our church. We don't talk about it much; most parishioners haven't even known about it. But like in all family systems, and the church is one, not talking about things isn't always the best option, either.

Our music director says he hears footsteps, or sometimes the laughter of children, behind closed doors late at night. Other staff have heard the same noises when alone in the building. And then, upon comparing stories, we find ourselves thinking: *It's Mrs. Camp.*

Official vs. nonofficial history

As in most churches, our official history focuses on the positive. In 1888, the local bishop challenged a small group of summer residents of Lake Minnetonka, some 20 miles west of Minneapolis, Minnesota, to bring God into their leisure time by building a church.

Responding to that call was George Camp, a lumber baron, and his wife, Lucy. They built a summer chapel and then donated it to the Diocese of Minnesota as a memorial for their three youngest children, who had died in childhood, and for the impending wedding of their only remaining child, also named Lucy. Written accounts detail the glory of that wedding — what the bride wore, how the church was decorated, etc.

Lingering in the oral history of the parish, however, is this: Mrs. Camp was evidently unable to come to terms with the loss of her three children. Three years after the church was built, she drowned herself across the road in Lake Minnetonka after tying several flatirons around her neck.

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In Alcoholics Anonymous, the term "elephant in the living room" describes how an alcoholic's family often deals with alcoholism — by sidestepping the huge issue of drinking that is crowding out everything else.

That same kind of paralysis may also exist in congregations when problems are operative but not acknowledged.

Here we examine how parishes may best come to terms with conflicts in their midst.

*This Issue:
Conflict &
Controversy*

Elephants in the Sanctuary

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When conflict arises, referring back to a clear mission statement provides helpful guidance in setting priorities for the use of limited time, talent and financial gifts.

When conflict is not at a high level in parishes, such issues as a new building, finances and worship top the list of problems...

with God cannot be fully attained by ignoring the elephants in the sanctuary.

If conflict fails to be addressed, resentment and ill will can be created and harbored for many years. Communications conducted in the spirit of love for thy neighbor and speaking the truth in love can result in conflict becoming easier to address and ultimately resolve.

Force, accommodation and compromise can also be less than desirable in resolving conflict in a parish. Force, for the obvious reasons, and accommodation because the person or group doing all the “giving” usually harbors resentment. Compromise often results in a competitive “give and take” negotiation, frustrating creative brainstorming and potentially bringing resentment.

A win-win solution

Day-to-day experiences, rather than “hot button” issues, are often the cause of conflict in parish life, with new buildings and leadership styles leading the charge. (See charts below.) A few years ago, for example, my parish faced conflict resulting from rapid growth. Our building became insufficient to meet our expanding needs. Some thought we should build a parish hall while others wanted a classroom wing. Unable to afford both, we were faced with competing priorities.

We resolved the conflict, fortunately, through collaborative problem solving. First, the vestry maintained an ongoing dialogue among its members and with others. Several open forums were held providing parishioners

the opportunity to discuss the needs of our growing congregation. By including everyone concerned, and collectively brainstorming options, a creative win-win solution was found.

The original design for the classroom wing was slightly altered, allowing for a parish hall, complete with a kitchen, to be included as one-third of the new building. The change in design allowed for ease of future conversion of that space into additional classrooms. Enthusiasm for the project increased significantly and the gifts received during the capital campaign exceeded our stated goal.

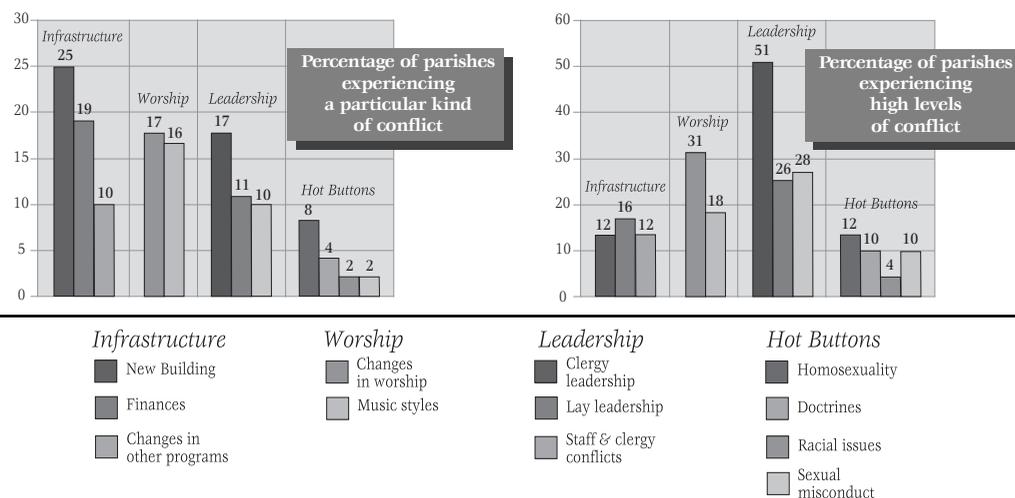
While the collaborative problem solving approach certainly worked as a process for resolving conflict in and of itself, **the importance of asking God to be central in our efforts cannot be overstated.** Each meeting began and ended with prayer. Every person involved in leadership was asked to give a personal reflection on what our growing parish meant. By sharing ourselves, and by asking the Holy Spirit to be present to lead and guide us, a graceful result was achieved. And through the process, our relationships with each other and with God were greatly enhanced.

Ward Richards is a professional mediator involved in conflict resolution. He serves on the board of the Episcopal Church Foundation, chairs its research and development committee, and is a member of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Skidaway Island, Georgia.

Congregations and Conflict

...but when things heat up, leadership styles are most often cited as the source of conflict.

Source: *The State of the Clergy, Church Pension Group, 2003. Data from 2001.*



Two of the biggest controversies in the church recently have been the consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson in the Diocese of New Hampshire and the ongoing debate regarding the blessing of same-sex unions. We asked two bishops, one "yea" and one "nay" at General Convention 2003, to provide their wisdom and insight to vestries struggling with these conflicts.

CONFLICT AND CONTROVERSY

Bringing Wounds *and* Blessings

by Henry Nutt Parsley, Jr.

Conflict can be difficult, especially in the church. The Episcopal Church is presently experiencing a period of disagreement, principally over issues of human sexuality.

While I, as a diocesan bishop, did not favor some of the decisions taken at the last General Convention on these matters, I am steadfastly loyal to the Episcopal Church and believe that with good will and grace we will be able to find our way through present disagreements. The conciliar processes of Anglicanism are often untidy and discerning the mind of Christ together is always an unfolding reality.

What do leaders do in such times? How do we help our churches manage the stresses of conflict? What helps congregations deal with disagreement in ways that build up rather than weaken our mission?

Wise leadership makes the difference between parishes that have remained unified and focused and those that have become anxious and polarized. I have observed many parishes engaging our present challenges. Let me attempt to distill the wisdom I have seen.

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GOD IS STILL AT WORK

When Conflict and Hope Abound

by Katharine Jefferts-Schori

Conflict and controversy are intrinsic to the church, even if many of us would prefer to live and worship in communities that never disagreed about anything. Jesus himself was executed in response to the controversy he stirred up; and the church has not been without conflict since. Even though we may heatedly disagree, we do aspire to respond to differences without resorting to crucifixion!

As leaders, the task of managing conflict is ever-present. A leader becomes and remains a leader by virtue of being able to make a clear decision and encouraging others to respond to that decision. Christians do that every day in responding to the expectations of the baptismal covenant, and Christians become leaders in their daily ministry as they experience and foster transformation in themselves and the world around them.

Conflict at its most basic is a difference between one or more views of the way things are or should be. In theological terms, we are in conflict because we have not yet arrived at the fullness of the Kingdom of God, and we will be in conflict until the Second Coming. Simply put, that means that God is still at work, and therefore, hope should abound! Conflict is a sign of life and a necessary precursor to growth.

That said, conflict still generates fear or discomfort in most of us.

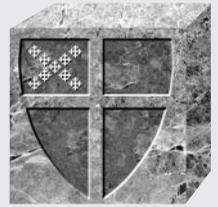
Leaders manage their reactions

Effective leaders learn to manage their own emotional reactions to conflict in ways that allow others to respond more rationally and less emotionally. The less anxious a leader is about the conflict, the more able others will be to engage the conflict constructively. Jesus' public ministry gives repeated examples of this principle of leadership.

The most public conflict in the Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion right now has to do with the controversial decisions of the 74th General Convention about matters of human sexuality. That particular conflict is being played out in a variety of ways around the church and the Communion, and it is a more painful issue in some places than others.

I did vote to consent to the election of the Rev. V. Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire, and I also voted to pass Resolution C051, which recognized that blessing same-sex unions is within the bounds of our common life as Episcopalians. Those decisions were far less controversial in Nevada than they were in some

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Attention, readers:

What has been your toughest decision as a vestry member?

How did you make it?

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by June 1, 2005

and we'll publish as many excerpts as possible

in a fall issue.

When Conflict and Hope Abound

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places, but they still engendered a fair bit of heat. The real struggle in Nevada came at our diocesan convention in 2003, when the Integrity chapter presented a resolution asking for a policy on same-sex blessings.

Suddenly the issue was not across the country; it was here in people's own worship communities. The convention eventually agreed to continue (and in many cases, begin) conversation about matters of human sexuality in their own congregations and regional gatherings, and to permit, with the bishop's consent, congregations to develop their own policies. The conversations in the year following showed a remarkable growth in community. Most were marked by far more light than heat, especially when individuals were willing to ask hard questions and/or share their own confusion and vulnerability.

The ability of a few leaders to model appropriate self-disclosure and respectful questioning made an enormous difference. The hard work of those conversations did not lead to uniformity of opinion by any means, but it did demonstrate to all who took part that their opinions were valued. The few who left the Episcopal Church were generally not those who took part in those discussions, and the congregations who avoided dealing with these issues have missed the true vitality that comes from wrestling with God.

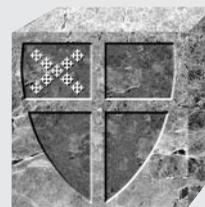
Holding decisions lightly

The most helpful aspect of leadership in a conflict is the ability to be clear about the decision that has been made without being defensive or argumentative. At the same time, a good leader is able to hold that decision lightly, with enough humility to recognize that no one individual ever holds the fullness of Truth in him or herself. We rarely make highly significant decisions that cannot later be revisited if better information comes to light. If we believe that God is present with us, and the Spirit still at work, then sometimes our decisions will change.

Our own church is a wonderful example, in its historic ability to hold differing positions in tension — Catholic and Reformed, high and low styles of worship, music that spans a millennium, and social policy that incenses some and gladdens the hearts of others.

Our ability to provide leadership in communities experiencing conflict is also a gift to the wider world. Churches are laboratories for daily labor; they are gymnasias where we train for life as Christians in the world. The Reign of God requires the ministry of each one of us, whether or not we can agree on exactly what it will look like!

*The Right Reverend Katharine Jefferts-Schori
is Bishop of Nevada.*



*Do not grumble,
beloved, against
one another, so that
you may not be
judged; see the Judge
is standing at the
doors.*

James 5:9

EDITOR'S NOTE



Dissension comes in different shapes. Secular media reports would seem to indicate that Gene Robinson's election as Bishop of New Hampshire and the question of blessing same-sex unions are ruling the day in our congregations. In some places, that is true. But Episcopal Church Foundation research indicates a 20-20-60 breakdown: 20 percent of our congregations endorse General Convention's actions, 20 percent are against them, and 60 percent come down "somewhere else."

What is also clear, says the Foundation's director of research, Bill Sachs, is that flexible and adaptive leadership are what count in congregational life. Hallmarks of good leadership include a mission-oriented focus, clear goals, formulated work plans, regular assessments, encouraging the ministry of others, recognizing and celebrating success, fostering a sense of community, and providing opportunities for deepening spirituality.

That's not to say we shouldn't pay attention to big events, like General Convention's actions in 2003. But it's how we do that — and how we decide smaller conflicts — that makes all the difference.

— Lindsay Hardin Freeman

*Next Issue:
Buildings and
Grounds*

Bringing Wounds *and* Blessings

continued from page 3

"Do not be anxious," Jesus wisely said in Matthew 6. Centuries later Edwin Friedman observed that unchecked anxiety is one of the most destructive forces in family systems such as the church. Our faith has much to say about managing anxiety through trust in the loving purposes of God. It is well to remember that "Fear not!" is the favorite greeting of the angels in Scripture.

Managing anxiety, so to minimize its impact on the life of the faith community, is a key task of leaders in the church. What Friedman called the "non-anxious presence" of leaders is a crucial gift to the church's life. It is what is needed to help lead the church into "all truth, and in all truth with all peace."

Tolerance and patience

This is especially important in times of conflict. Conflict is endemic to the life of faith, not something to be afraid of. Anglicanism has always recognized that faithful people will have differing points of view on certain theological and social issues. While we share the "faith once delivered to the saints," new issues inevitably arise in the church's experience and the struggle to discern truth is not easy. Anglican comprehensiveness requires both tolerance and patience. A genius of this church has been our capacity to disagree and still worship side by side, steadfast in mission together.

In times of conflict it is essential for leaders to do four things: keep the church focused on its essential mission, communicate well about the issues at hand, respect differing points of view, and trust the Spirit.

First, **staying focused** on mission prevents a parish from becoming centered in anything other than Christ and his work. In parishes where leaders become fixated on issues — whether disagreements over chancel furniture, new hymnody, or human sexuality — the parish suffers. As Casey Stengel once said, "The main thing is to make the main thing the main thing." As issues come and go, healthy people expect the church to keep its focus on worship, teaching and pastoral care, and reaching out to love and serve others. The vestry is called to be a focus of unity, where mission is central and issues are addressed but not allowed to dominate.

Secondly, **good communication minimizes anxiety** that people feel when they do not know what is going on. Healthy churches deal with issues openly rather than

hide from them. In our current conflict it helps to explain the church's teaching on sexual ethics and the questions being raised regarding pastoral and moral guidance for persons in the church who are homosexually oriented, as we are coming to understand this reality.

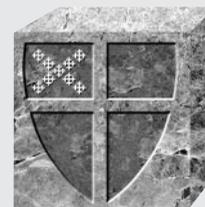
As a bishop I care deeply about the church's inclusion and pastoral care for all persons and for justice. Yet I do not believe that we have found an adequate new *consensus fidelium* about same-sex relationships. It has been helpful for me to explain my conscientious decision not to consent to the election of Bishop Robinson and my steadfast conviction about being loyal to the church as we struggle through these matters. Reasonable people can disagree, but we all need to understand what the issues are and how the church is facing them.

Thirdly, **leaders must listen** to the range of opinions always present in a congregation. Otherwise polarization quickly results. When persons feel that they are being heard and different views respected, anxiety is diminished and trust is enhanced. When the leaders of a church listen to only one point of view, the community becomes divided. Our tradition is always best at "both/and" thinking rather than "either/or" thinking.

Finally, in times of conflict, **leaders say their prayers** and help congregations trust Jesus' promise that the Spirit will guide us into all truth. Our faith holds that God is at work in all things. Even disagreement can be a channel for God to shape and form us in his service. Leaders keep their attention on God and trust that, as George Herbert wrote, "God moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform." This is our spiritual foundation.

It is painful when faithful people disagree and at times hurt each other. Through it, nonetheless, we can grow in faith and commitment. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, through conflict we are both wounded and blessed. Leaders are called to love the church through such difficult times and trust God for the rest.

The Right Reverend Henry Nutt Parsley, Jr. is Bishop of Alabama and chairs the Theology Committee for the House of Bishops.



*And from the Lutherans:
"Welcome to the world
of the church, the Body
of Christ made up of
sinners. Finding
conflict in the church
should not surprise us.
The church is not a
perfect place with
perfect people. Instead
the church is made up
of people in need of
God's grace and
guidance who come
and gather in the name
of Christ."*

*Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America,
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Skeletons in the Sacristy

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While probably not so dramatic, many churches have a range of both joys and tragedies in their past. Most of the happy ones are celebrated, remembered, perhaps embellished. But sad or tragic events may be buried, collectively altered, and pushed aside due to both pain at the time and uncertainty in knowing how to deal with them.

"Most parishes do have stuff in their closets," says Speed Leas of the Alban Institute and a specialist in parish conflict. "Some have worked through it, and had substantial growth. But if you have a place that calls a lot of rectors and just runs through them, or clergy say 'that's a tough place,' then you have a place that needs some attention."

Which begs the question: How do skeletons rumbling around in a church affect current-day life and what do vestries do about them?

"The purpose of looking at the past is not to dwell there, but to see how the past affects the present," says family systems analyst Peggy Treadwell, director of the Counseling Center at St. Columba's Church in Washington, D.C. "There's an old saying, 'anybody can take the truth, but the secrets can kill you.'"

Secrets can kill you

Such secrets, she says, may influence congregational life without parishioners even knowing it. "It's uncanny," she says, "but people will often repeat the same behavior when they don't know the truth. When we know the truth, we have a choice."

Getting at that truth isn't always easy, but the process is essential, adds Bishop Clay Matthews, executive director of the Office of Pastoral Development for the Presiding Bishop. "It makes a tremendous difference, especially with incidents of misconduct, whether they be boundary violations or sexual misconduct or financial misconduct. Should the issues remain in the closet, those are the ones that

will come back and affect the health of congregations."

Matthews stresses, however, that the unmasking of skeletons be done carefully, and that getting a trained consultant is helpful. He cautions vestries to be aware of potential litigation, especially if legal agreements have been reached. It may be best to review general developments, rather than pinpoint all the details.

At the front door

So, speaking of skeletons, what about Mrs. Camp and the unresolved grief that she so literally laid at our church's front door?

Although her path to the lake was one of inner torture and ultimate isolation, I hope now that she is going from strength to strength in God's kingdom. I believe that she is there with us at the altar rail each Sunday, like so many others. We stand there, none of us perfect, all of us sinners, yet still connected, still one with each other, some visible, others not seen.

And perhaps, through her, God is speaking another message for those of us now at St. Martin's about sharing seemingly unbearable grief. We'll never know. But I pray that we reach out a little more, are more aware of each other's troubles, and are more willing to share our own.

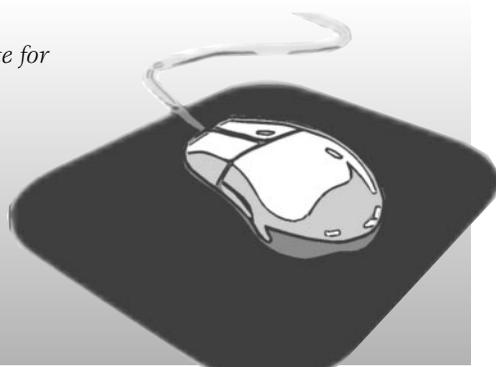
(Additional sources consulted for this article were retired Bishop Claude Payne from the Diocese of Texas and Peggy Herman, a sociologist, professional mediator, and member of St. Gregory's Church in Athens, Georgia.)

The Rev. Lindsay Hardin Freeman edits Vestry Papers and is priest associate at St. Martin's-by-the-Lake in Minnetonka Beach, Minnesota.

Check the Episcopal Church Foundation's website for materials on conflict resolution and leadership development.

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