

January 2014

Becoming competent and resilient as a leader who engages with conflict

How do you feel about conflict in the church? Worried? Scared? Angry? Energised? Hopeful? Most of us tend to have negative associations with conflict, especially within the church, where we think the focus should be on loving one another. However, it is normal to have disagreements, tensions and low-level conflict in Christian ministry – these things go with being a living and authentic community of diverse people. When one is in a leadership role of any kind – especially if you're in the primary leadership position – then there is a particular challenge and responsibility for working well with such tensions. Some can find this challenge and responsibility stressful, or can feel ill-equipped to carry the load. So let's explore the question of how we can be both more competent and more resilient in working with conflict in the church.

In Bridge Builders' work with Christian leaders, we aim to build capacity for engaging with conflict in more confident and competent ways. (By 'conflict' I mean any situation where there are tensions over differences, not just escalated situations where there are stronger feelings and more likelihood of damaged relationships.) As leaders, there are some key foundations for us to build and strengthen.

1. A new attitude towards conflict

Have you learnt to think about conflict as inherent in all of life, and to see it as potentially creative, offering opportunities for growth and the discernment of God's activity in the world? In its diversity and difference, God has created a good world in which tension and conflict are in-

built and inevitable. The Bible offers a rich resource for reflecting on conflict in this way, and for understanding that engaging with conflict, through exploring and reconciling our diversity and differences, is at the heart of Christian mission and ministry. Read some articles here as a way to get started: www.bbministries.org.uk/resources.

2. Greater self-awareness

There are two parts to this. One part is knowing myself, how I operate, what my strengths are, and what I find stressful. As well as knowing how my style and approach can impact others negatively, especially when there's 'too much' of



any style. The second part is developing a better understanding of others who are different from me, and recognising what they need and how I can get the best out of them – not always easy precisely because others are different from me! As anyone who is married can testify, this is a life-long journey. Useful tools here can include the *Friendly Style Profile for Communication at Work* which explores our preferences between four different styles, and shows how these shift when a situation becomes more intense. Alternatives include the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* and similar tools.

3. An understanding of emotional process

The way that people act and respond in groups is typically shaped by emotional forces, as each person tries to balance the need for togetherness (a pressure to be 'family') with the need to be a distinct individual. As leaders we need to develop the capacity to function in a mature, well-differentiated way, acting on our own convictions while staying connected to and responsive to others. Jesus models this powerfully for us, in the midst of intense pressures. To do this well, it helps to reflect on our family backgrounds, and the generational patterns and dynamics that have shaped us; and we'll need to learn to differentiate ourselves and stay connected within our extended family. The book *The Leader's Journey* by Herrington, Creech and Taylor offers one helpful way in.

4. Recognising which approach to conflict to use

Different circumstances call for different ways of handling a conflict. So some careful reflection may be needed. Is this an issue which needs me to take a more forceful approach? Or is strengthening the relationship more important, and should I therefore be more accommodating? Is it worth spending time and energy finding a genuinely collaborative way forward, that addresses different people's concerns, with this other issue? Or do I just need to keep my head down? As a leader it's important to recognise what my default mode is, and to know when I need to take an approach that is outside my comfort zone. A good way into this exploration is *Style Matters: The Kraybill Conflict Style Inventory*.

5. Employing some conflict resolution tools

There are some basic insights from the field of conflict resolution which can help us to address everyday tensions and disagreements. A start is distinguishing between the issue we're trying to settle, the positions we take on that issue, the range of underlying concerns, and our more fundamental human needs. Exploring our deeper concerns and giving space to be heard and treated with respect are usually key to unlocking a way forward. Fisher and Ury's old book, *Getting to Yes*, is one resource. (Note that identity-based conflicts are more complex and need a more transformative approach.)

6. Learning process skills

Recent research has highlighted the need for clergy to be better equipped with process skills and tools for dealing with disagreement in groups. The range of these collaborative skills include: distinguishing between content and process; clarifying the process being used to address the issue; active use of paraphrasing and summarising; and ways of testing for agreement or consensus. Most of these do not come naturally: they have to be learnt. Among others, Bridge Builders offers training in these skills for church leaders.

Because of our diversity and differences, we are never going to escape tension and a certain level and type of conflict – not even in the newly created heaven and earth. God is not going to wipe away our differences in the new creation – because that diversity is integral to the nature of our Creator. However, we can grow in our maturity and capacity to handle tensions and conflict with greater skill and resilience. May 2014 be a year when you grow in this way, into the maturity Christ calls us to.

Grace and peace to you.

Alastair McKay
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For reflection

- Where are you experiencing 'conflict' at present? How is it affecting you?
- What idea from this article might you follow up on, in approaching conflict better?
- How do you see yourself growing in handling tensions? How can you pray for yourself and your 'enemies' more Christianly in the midst of conflict?

