

GROWING Together

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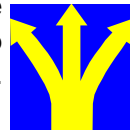
WHEN WE DISAGREE: LIVING WITH DIFFERENCE IN OUR CONGREGATIONS

Is yours a healthy congregation? Being healthy does not mean that we all think alike. A healthy church is like a healthy family that talks openly about differences even when those differences cause fear and make people anxious. There are ways of negotiating relationships even when the truth is expressed in a variety of ways.

Members within one congregation may have different levels of comfort when it comes to welcoming newcomers. One group feels that it is important to include anyone and everyone who walks in the door for worship while another group feels that participation should be more carefully controlled.

Congregations worship with different styles of music and instruments; for some the use of an organ is central in worship and for others a worship band is most appropriate. Some churches sing from hymn books and others from projection screens. Varieties of experience and expression are valid. Variety is more than valid; it is required and should be celebrated.

Throughout its 2000 year history, the Christian church has divided along lines most often described as “conservative” and “liberal.” Maybe it comes down to the fact that people navigate life between two important poles; those of inner experience and outer response. How we might live these out can look wildly different.



“Liberals” and “conservatives” often accuse each other of misunderstanding the fundamental truth of the faith. Liberals are inclined to look to the outward life of justice, equality and fairness that flows from the gospel while conservatives focus more on the inner life of faith, commitment and consistent witness. This is a broad generalization; hopefully any reader who doesn’t want to be pigeon-holed too easily will question these assumptions.

Jesus lived in a way that drew all kinds of people to him. He welcomed everyone into his circle of friends; little children, the privileged rich, despised tax collectors. In Jesus, acts of forgiveness, healing, truth-telling and table hospitality are a model for being the church together, for living with difference.

In *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf writes that Jesus, in his life, teaching and death, makes room for others. Within himself, Jesus takes on the joys and sorrows of his friends and invites them closer. He makes room in his person and in his heart for those who have need.

Christian people are invited to do the same: “Having been embraced by God, we must make space for others in ourselves and invite them in – even our enemies.”¹ Can we be both loving and accepting of others who disagree with us, while proclaiming the truth as we understand it with clarity and integrity?

What are the implications for us in the church when we divide along these self-imposed lines of “conservative” and “liberal?” What is lost when we separate from each other? Will we accept, with patience, a variety of styles of worship? Can we hold back on making judgments about gay and lesbian Christians in our congregations while creating space within ourselves for discerning together what God would have us be? Do we naturally include all people in our church life regardless of race, socio-economic status or special needs?

There are healthy ways of meeting and talking, of making room and getting to know those whom we call “stranger” or “sinner” or “enemy.” Sincere interest, courtesy and respect are vital in our conversations within congregations and denominations when we disagree.

As Christians, faithfulness is our primary desire. The family of God seeks health in its worship and ministry. Welcoming the stranger and binding up the wounds of a broken world is our business. To make room for the “other” is our baptismal and community calling.

¹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Nashville: Abingdon Pres, 1966: 129.

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