

We Can Choose

The change was conspicuous and unwelcome. All at once an oppressive tension permeated the room and covered us like a wet blanket. How had it arrived so swiftly and without warning?

Just a few minutes before people were laughing, engaged in animated conversations that flowed easily among the members of a bustling, growing United Methodist congregation.

They had participated in an enriching and joyful hour of worship and prepared to gather in a festive mood to share a tasty light lunch. Following the meal in the fellowship hall, we heard a report from the committee leading the campaign to pay for building expansion and improvements.

You could almost see the goodwill slip out of the room as it was replaced by an unpleasant and unwanted mood.

First one person, and then another, asked questions that the committee was not prepared to answer. The committee's leaders beseeched the church members to affirm the guiding vision for the campaign and asked for patience in sorting through the layers of fine points that were yet to be clarified, researched, and decided. But the folks asking questions wanted more details *now*, and they expected specific information about the planning and decision-making process before they would embrace the vision as their own.

The congregation had hit a wall. Some were ready to lean forward, trusting that in due course both their choices and the information to make wise decisions would be available. Others had concerns and doubts that they felt were not being taken into account with enough care and caution.

The more the committee leaders repeated, "Trust us!" the more agitated and dissatisfied those with doubts became. The folks gathered were soon at an impasse.

Most readers of *Circuit Rider* will not attend General Conference. But all of us are involved in the work of congregations where important decisions can easily become entangled in controversy and tensions that influence our attitudes about and treatment of others. People who share the Christian faith and common aspirations and values can, suddenly and unexpectedly, find themselves at loggerheads. These disputes can emanate a startling vehemence and take on a momentum that overwhelms us.

The day after my visit to the congregation struggling over its capital funds campaign, I attended a meeting of a general church group that experienced similar dysfunction and disruption in its deliberations. In both cases, the needed information was not equally available to all who shared responsibility for decision-making, and the assumptions made by one group were not as evident or convincing to

another. Consequently, there were doubts about the motivations and judgment of the persons in authority who were pressing for a particular decision. As with the local church meeting, the result for the general church group was estrangement that quickly turned into distrust and alienation.

And that leads to my plea. It is not, "Can't we all just get along?" I allow that there are issues, assertions, and decisions that require more than simply our good will to resolve. There are appropriate times for rigorous debate, honest and passionate argument about competing perspectives regarding matters of great import that have implications for how we witness to the Gospel and the reign of God.

I am not eager for anything less than truth-telling and ardent faithfulness. We do not seek a cheap grace to camouflage the demanding choices we need to make about how we shall believe, live, teach, and serve together. This is so for congregations as well as for all sectors of the connectional church.

But by the grace of God, let's find the strength and determination to resist the temptation and collusion that drive us to

demonize, disparage, and despise one another! When the "fights" are over, the final question ought not be, "Did we win?" Rather, it must be, "Have we given evidence to the love, justice, and faithfulness that God requires and that Jesus Christ has made possible through the blessing of his life, death, and resurrection?"

Conflict and anger abound when there is the appearance or fact of unequal access to information, differing conclusions about core values or operating assumptions. And this often leads to contentiousness, fear, and frustration in our corporate life. To hope that we will be immune to such forces and effects is naive. We all get caught up in "church fights." But that isn't the last word! With God's help and the support of the community of faith, we can walk down another path, selecting a more faithful and graceful way to tread through important debates about what it means to be the faithful people of God. And when all is said and done, we

can choose to be disciples who take risks to find (if only provisional) common ground, rooted in the good news of Jesus Christ and the astounding and redeeming grace of God. □

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