

Taking Differences Seriously

Dean Francis

We minister today in a world where division and dissension is the norm. Politicians and news commentators are constantly defining different perspectives. To be the Body of Christ in the midst of countervailing viewpoints means to take differences seriously and to work toward a community of faith where these differences are honored and respected.

Pastors and church leaders often find themselves in the midst of conflict, pulled toward one side and then the other. In an effort to stake out the “rightness” of their positions or to seek validation from the leader, parishioners often triangulate

the pastor into their disagreements, urging them to establish positions on the issues in an “us-versus-them” dynamic. The result is not healthy for the church.

However, sometimes the pastor’s words become the focus of conflict when prophetic and controversial stands are taken. Indeed the prophetic voice is an important responsibility of being a local church pastor. The church needs leaders who boldly proclaim the truth about God’s demand that we be a people of justice and mercy. But the pastor must be ever mindful of her or his role within the faith community as one who leads a community whose members do not always see the world with the same set of eyeglasses.

Following are the reflections of a pastor who has sought to be accepting and welcoming to members of my congregations who hold differing theological, political, and biblical positions. These are not the suggestions of a sage who has done it all right. Far from it! They are simply the lessons learned by a fellow traveler on the path of congregational leadership.

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Preach and teach from the biblical witness. Christians may not agree with what the Bible says, it may make us uncomfortable, mad, or puzzled, but we cannot ignore it if we are to be faithful disciples of Jesus. The Bible must at least be the beginning point of conversations and discernment. We can and do disagree about what the Bible means or how it should be interpreted. But it cannot simply be put aside because it doesn’t fit our perspectives. For the church, dealing with differing views on faith issues does not begin with the question, “What does the American Civil Liberties Union or the Institute on Religion and Democracy say about a given issue?” It must begin with the question, “What does Jesus/the bibli-

cal witness say about this issue, either implicitly or explicitly?” By making the biblical witness central in our dialog, pastors encourage congregants to study, pray, and reflect upon scripture in the belief that the Spirit can and does work through the canon to bring gentle judgment to emotionally charged issues. Additionally worship itself is a formative place for

expanding views, building community, and enabling reconciliation. By sharing the peace, hearing the Word, and celebrating Eucharist, a congregation can build a community that displays genuine concern for each other.

Outline your own position as clearly and carefully as possible. Printed sermons, newsletter articles, and pastoral letters can be helpful in clarifying the pastor’s position. A carefully conceived position paper or sermon helps congregants to know the pastor’s point of view. When issues carry a high emotional charge, this helps congregation members reflect upon what the pastor is saying before they “shoot from the hip” with a response. It also helps them point to specific positions that the pastor has presented and ask clarifying questions. Finally it helps the congregation know that the pastor has taken care to ponder this issue carefully before sharing a perspective.

Acknowledge that differences among the congregants exist. Sometimes this is

as simple as saying in worship or a class, "Now I know that not all of us believe this way." By doing this the pastor can give a voice, not just to the folks who agree with him or her, but also to honor and respect those who see the world from differing perspectives. This acknowledgement also invites visitors with beliefs differing from those of the pastor to explore the local church as a place where they can be welcomed and accepted.

Invite dialog. By holding open forums for discussion, feedback sessions for sermons, and by inviting conversation after taking a controversial stand, the pastor can help to create an environment where open and frank discussion can take place. At the same time church leaders can facilitate conversation by responding to concerns in a gracious, nondefensive manner. By modeling this kind of response, pastors can help the church be a community where people will not feel threatened or attacked because they hold differing faith perspectives.

Use humor and playfulness. When the church is dealing with matters of great meaning and import, sometimes the best way to approach differences is to be reminded that we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously. Despite the strong feelings we hold, we are still all children of God, seeking to be faithful to our understanding of God's call upon our lives. An ability to smile at ourselves and encounter each other with playfulness, joy, and acceptance is critical to building a healthy community—even when we believe the other person is dead wrong! Great care needs to be exercised when using humor, but if the pastor is able to laugh at himself or herself, then others may be encouraged to do the same.

Draw upon the importance of community. One of the things that keeps healthy churches together in the midst of disagreement is a commitment to Christian community. It is the leader's responsibility to instill within the church the sense that no single divisive issue can override the spiritual strength that comes from being a part of a community of faith where members truly care for each other, even when its members disagree. A person may leave the church over a theological issue, but more often they leave because

they have not experienced a connection with the community that is their church.

It is one of the pastor's primary responsibilities to define for the church the nature and foundation of the church's community. Historically, how was the church started, what were its values, what are the consistent themes that have run through its communal life and what does this mean for the church today? It is the pastor's responsibility to write and speak from the perspective of what kind of community the local church has been and to

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envision the kind of community the church can become.

Risk your own self-disclosure. The question constantly asked by parishioners is, "Pastor, what do you believe?" Congregations long to hear these theological perspectives from their leaders, but not because they are ready and willing to accept the pastor's version of the truth as the final answer. Instead they need these interpretations because they are seeking a method of inquiry and discernment that they can apply to their own faith journey. This is an important distinction because it means that the pastor's role is not as purveyor of truth to be handed down from on high in the pulpit or classroom. Rather, the pastor is a fellow traveler who is carefully and prayerfully struggling with what the Scripture and the Spirit are saying to her or him as a spiritual leader of the community.

Know your audience and its positions. Confronting controversial issues is always a pastoral endeavor. If a pastor is going to preach an anti-war sermon, she or he needs to know about and be in contact with, the family in the church that has a daughter serving in Iraq. If the pastor is going to interpret Scripture from an experiential, progressive perspective, it would be in their best interest to know how the person who holds orthodox views might respond. Pastors could ask themselves,

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Every sermon preached, every class taught can be reviewed from the various perspectives that are present within the local church community. By thinking in this way, the pastor takes seriously the differing theological positions within the congregation and opens him or herself up to the Spirit's presence and power to bring understanding and clarity.

Avoid being the person in the middle. When people within the congregation disagree it should not be the pastor's role to serve as the referee, but instead to push them toward each other. Ask them to have coffee with each other, ask

one of them to teach the other's children in Sunday school, put them on the same committee, invite them to the same prayer or fellowship group. In short, church leaders can urge members to encounter each other on a personal as well as theological basis.

Perhaps by implementing some of these strategies, pastors will be able to accept and celebrate the many differences that are present in their congregations. Clearly the church is filled with people who disagree with one another. Week after week, these fellow Christians sit together in worship singing "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds," while at the same time they stew about the folly of each other's perspectives. Hopefully, the tie that binds us together can be strengthened by a careful attention to some of these suggestions. □



Dean Francis is the Senior Pastor at First United Methodist Church, Evanston, Illinois.