

Our Conflict Transformation work with Faith Communitiesⁱ

By Margaret Keyser

During this past year our work with faith communities has brought us throughout Massachusetts, as well as parts of Connecticut, New York City and Rhode Island.

Conflicts in churches are real and very serious. For many the church has become a second “family”, a place of rest and peace, encouragement and community, and connecting with the Holy, the Higher Power. The question often raised by members is, “Shouldn’t we be able to deal with our problems? We are a church, aren’t we? “

The request for an intervention does not simply arise from the inability of faith communities to address conflicts, but more often, because of strongly held positions, beliefs and perspectives, as well as powerful emotions around common concerns.

Below are only a few of the critical issues which we encountered in our work with faith communities

Leadership and administrative issues, including different visions and understandings of roles and responsibilities among clergy, staff, board members and/or lay members

This problem is not unique to the life of faith communities; however, it is a real problem within many congregations. Lack of clarity in this area often leads to challenging relationships among the pastor, staff, board or council members, on the one hand, as well as dysfunctional management systems on the other. If left unresolved for too long, it could lead to long-standing conflicts as well as lack of focus and productivity. We have also found that the inability of leaders to implement the congregation’s vision, mission and plans could lead to a general malaise, lack of energy and discontent among parishioners towards their leaders. Once this problem is recognized as an important causal factor in the conflict, a congregation can then deal with it effectively.

Keeping core values at the center

Keeping the core values, beliefs and spiritual norms at the center of a church is often a challenge when difficult situations or conflicts emerge. Leaders and members often find it hard to return to the essence of what church really means, because of the distractions caused by serious disagreements and conflicts. When unresolved conflicts result in extreme polarization and broken relationships, the meaning of church, spirituality, God, as well as other core values, often become secondary in the minds and hearts of leaders and laity.

Clear communication channels

Lack of information sharing or proper communication channels are key issues that lead to conflicts in a church. A conflict could arise when a new practice is instituted without informing those close to the situation about the new development. This often leads to volunteer members stepping down or even leaving the church.

Generational issues

Many seniors have become accustomed to traditional practices in the church. New forms of worship, for example, could lead to having more than one service, as well as other different rites and practices in order to meet the needs of different members. These changes can lead to very tense situations, where

some may feel their “family” is falling apart. Unless certain measures are implemented to address these realities effectively, problems can worsen, leading to polarization or even a split in the congregation.

Peace and Reconciliation in churches

One of the key factors in bringing about peace and reconciliation in churches is the establishment of common ground among parties in conflict—in other words, finding a set of common interests that all parties can agree on. In the faith community these common interests may range from the need for spiritual fulfillment, however diverse members’ beliefs may be, and being part of a community that fulfills a range of those needs, such as meaningful worship, and being able to volunteer and share gifts and talents outside of the home and work place.

Through the conflict transformation process it is possible to bring opposing parties to this place of feeling planted together again in common nurturing ground, to a place of deeper mutual understanding, which in turn creates opportunities for change and transformation as well as for peace and reconciliation.

Our Conflict Transformation Approach

Our work involves the following hands-on approach which goes to the heart of conflicts:

- Facilitated dialogue to help leaders, board members and the larger congregation listen to one another, in order to understand the conflict from different perspectives
- Mediation of specific conflicts between and among individuals, committees and boards
- Joint problem-solving to address issues identified by everyone involved
- Skills training to help leaders and members transform their patterns of behavior
- Constructive initiatives to refocus, rebuild and strengthen the work of the congregation
- Relationship-building initiatives to bring healing and reconciliation
- Coaching leaders throughout the intervention

We offer you the words of one seasoned faith leader who witnessed the effects of our work in his congregation ...

“Parishioners at large as well as lay leaders and staff all indicated that you had helped them to turn the church towards more faithful and healthy ways. You gave them hope. . . You established an atmosphere of trust where people felt safe enough to discuss long-term hurts and fears, some of which had been underground for a decade or more. You created a climate where people could admit and learn from errors without being personally judged or branded with guilt. You prepared people to reconcile and equipped them for rebuilding.”

ⁱ Faith Communities refer to congregations with different belief systems and persuasions.