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The ADC Disciple

Anabaptist Disciples of Christ is an affiliation of Conservative Anabaptist churches seeking likeminded fellowship, instruction, and accountability in church administration and congregational life in the Biblical pattern of the Apostolic church.

The Embattled Pastor
How to Navigate Conflict and Criticism

by Steven Lee

"Your church lacks community."

"You botched caring for me during my husband's affair."

"You are not a warm church."

"Too much red tape at the church."

"The church is too big."

"Your scripted prayers seem silly."

Ouch, I thought when reading these words. These were comments directed at our church, our people, and our leadership. Each critique stung like a handful of gravel hitting my face. As anyone in leadership knows, criticism stings. Though we asked for this feedback from departing members, criticism is never pleasant when it comes.

As biting as such disapproval can be, however, it's still better than open hostilities and quarreling. Disagreement, misunderstandings, frustration, and disunity can tear at the seams of Christ's church. Conflict leads to hurt feelings, judged motives, and flared tempers. Church members might take sides. Gossip and whispers spread like wildfire, and soon the forest is raging. If criticism is like a sprained ankle, conflict is the fracture.

Conflict Goes Way Back

Conflict and criticism in the church are inevitable at times. Life is messy, full of bumps and bruises. The church is a gathering of sinners who unfortunately still sin. Misunderstandings happen. Sharp words cut and attack, impossible to reel back in. Criticism can lead to conflict and conflict to criticism, running on a dreadful treadmill of hurt and pain. The last several years brought about increased friction in many churches, but conflict is not new. Disunity that divides churches has been around since the beginning.

In Philippians, Paul entreats two beloved co-laborers of the gospel — Euodia and Syntyche — to "agree in the Lord" (Philippians 4:2). These two women have labored side by side with Paul, and their names are written in the book of life (Philippians 4:3). They are genuine followers of Christ who were "together for the gospel" but are now divided by some sharp disagreement that has become known to the entire church. Church conflict is as old as the church.

Addressing conflict is not easy work. It's like plunging the toilet: messy, unpleasant, but necessary. Ignoring conflict only exacerbates it, like closing the basement door as the black mold creeps up the walls. It's not going to go away by itself, and the results will be catastrophic.

Three Ways to Lead in Conflict

How, then, can pastors and elders move toward the fray rather than retreat? Like courageous first responders who run toward chaos, how can pastors be ready to engage conflict with courage, conviction, humility, and gentleness?

> ***"Pastors cannot run from conflict, nor can they be too eager to fight."***

It's no easy task. Some can be paralyzed by fear of man and fear of failure. Still others are much too eager to jump into battle. Like prizefighters eager to find sparring partners, such pastors are unfit to engage. Consider Paul's wise words to the young Timothy:

The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his oppo-

nents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:24–26)

We see the difficulty of the task. Pastors cannot run from conflict, nor can they be too eager to fight. Kindness, patience, and gentleness must accompany the willingness to engage, exhort, admonish, and rebuke. How does one thread the needle? What truths help Christian pastors and leaders engage in conflict willingly, without relishing the next quarrel? Consider three foundational beliefs for those who seek to serve in conflict.

1. Humbly remember this is God's church.

First, remember that the church is not yours. Moses models this humble attitude. After the exodus, God's anger is stirred up against Israel's idolatrous worship of the golden calf. What does Moses do? He intercedes by reminding God "that this nation is your people" (Exodus 33:13). Moses makes clear that Israel isn't his people, but God's. He models humble dependence upon God to work among his people for their good.

The parallel for pastors is this: humbly remember that the church is Christ's church. When conflict comes, spiritual leaders are wise to resist the urge to fix things in their own strength and wisdom. Jesus is sanctifying his church. He is eager to give his help, his wisdom, and his grace for the good of his church. Pastors are also wise to remember they, and their churches, are being sanctified. Lessons remain to be learned; grace remains to be given; more wisdom is yet to be bestowed. God works in and through conflict for the good of his people. Remember, Jesus is the master carpenter, crafting his ultimate creation, the glorious church of God.

Pastors, pray like King Solomon as he faced the daunting task of leading God's people:

Now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. . . . Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people? (1 Kings 3:7, 9)

Humbly pray for discernment to lead the great people of God. Ask for wisdom from the God who gives generously and lavishly, for the benefit of his church (James 1:5).

2. Humbly remember Christ's example.

Second, emulate Christ's example of selflessness and sacrifice. Pastors are undershepherds who take cues from the chief Shepherd himself. And Jesus "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. . . . He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7–8). All believers, and especially leaders, are called to imitate his humility, servanthood, and sacrifice.

"Nothing will undermine leadership more quickly than selfishness and a lack of humility."

Selfish ambition, conceit, envy, and rivalry have no place in the church, much less among the church's leaders. Some of the strongest condemnations in Scripture are against the self-serving shepherds of Ezekiel 34. God's people were scattered, devoured, and preyed upon by Israel's shepherds. Nothing will undermine leadership more quickly than selfishness and a lack of humility. God's servants must indeed be servants, humbly obeying the master. Pastors are to "share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 2:3). We pastors serve at the pleasure of the King. We are under authority. When armed with the mind of Christ, pastors are able to maintain the unity of the Spirit, outdo one another in honor, and "reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Timothy 4:2).

As pastors, we put aside personal preferences and opinions, and seek to serve as Christ would have us, exhibiting his selflessness and patience. We eagerly and humbly embrace the role of servant as undershepherds of Christ.

3. Humbly speak the truth in love.

Finally, speak the truth in love. Godly pastors exhibit an unswerving commitment to truthfulness that is honed and shaped by a deep, abiding love for God's people. They cultivate Paul-like love, yearning for their people with the affection of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:8). Their words build up rather than tear down; their speech is loving. What they say, even while admonishing, is infused with gentleness and care. Their teaching has the essence of love coupled with the unflinching truth.

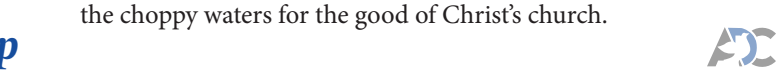
It's here that many a pastor has gone astray. The temptation to appease, placate, and quell conflict and tension is great. Yet, undershepherds' words are to be "gracious, seasoned with salt," never lies or half-truths masquerading as graciousness (Colossians 4:6). Pastors are to "set the believers an example in speech" (1 Timothy 4:12). With Paul, pastors renounce all the disgraceful, underhanded ways of the world (2 Corinthians 4:2).

Candid speech sheds light, rather than obscuring. So, pastors stubbornly let their yes be yes and their no be no (James 5:12). We seek to be tenaciously true to our words. We labor not to undermine the trust we have been given by God to be heralds of the great truth of the gospel. We resist any temptation to mollify critics by modifying the truth. Instead, we refuse to tamper with the truth, but proclaim the truth in love so that the church might grow up into Christ (Ephesians 4:15).

Hope in God Who Is Working

In the midst of choppy waters, remember God's promise to his servants and to his people. God promises undershepherds a glorious reward: "When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory" (1 Peter 5:4). Conflict and criticism will never be easy, but the pains and labors will be small compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.

Similarly, God promises his people that he will complete the good work he has begun (Philippians 1:6). The church is being sanctified so that it will be pure and blameless for the day of Christ. Hold onto that promise as a raft of hope as you dive into the choppy waters for the good of Christ's church.



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desiringgod.org/articles/the-embattled-pastor

PASTOR SPOTLIGHT

In memory of

Larry A. Hershberger

May 8, 1964 - May 4, 2024

Larry A. Hershberger 59, of Winesburg, passed away at his residence on Saturday, May 4, 2024 due to an autoimmune disease and heart failure.

He was born on May 8, 1964 to Alvin and Katie Ann (Wengerd) Hershberger. On June 4, 1987 he married Clara Yoder who survives.

Larry was a loving husband, father and grandfather. He was ordained to the ministry at Bethel Fellowship in 2008. Larry was a man filled with passion for people and a love to serve his Savior. He worked in log home construction with Fairview Log Homes for many years and was the owner of Homestead Builders.

In addition to his wife Clara and his father Alvin, he is survived by his children, Leon (Emily) Hershberger of Sugarcreek, Lori (Kevin) Mast of Trail, Eric (Stacy) Hershberger of Winesburg and JoAnn (Ryan) Choj of Berlin; 12 grandchildren, Alexis, Sierra and Jenna Hershberger; Ariana, Kaden, Kloe and Aubrey Mast; Grant, Paiten and April Hershberger; and Olivia and Octavia Choj; siblings, Joe (Lizzie Marie) Hershberger of Trail, Mervin (Ruth) Hershberger of Winesburg, Steve (Wilma) Hershberger of Canastota, NY, Laura Hershberger of Winesburg; and father-in-law, Dan (Mary) Yoder of Dundee.

In addition to his mother Katie Ann, he was preceded in death by his grandson, Caleb Lance Hershberger; brother, Vernon Hershberger; sister-in-law, Carol Hershberger; and mother-in-law, Katie Yoder.

Funeral services were held at United Dayspring Mennonite, Millersburg, Ohio, on Wednesday, May 8, 2024 at 10:00 AM with Pastor Judson Schrock officiating. Burial followed in the Bethel Fellowship Cemetery.

A special thank you to Ohio's Hospice LifeCare for their assistance and to the church and friends for their visits and prayers.

Revelation 14:13 – "Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, 'Write: 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Yes, says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them."

We extend our deepest sympathies to the family and grieve with the Bethel Pastoral team in their loss.

ADC Church Profile —

Harvest Mennonite Church (HMC), located in Fortuna, Missouri, was founded in October 2015.

The current pastoral team consists of Leonard and Minerva Martin (Lead Pastor) and Alan and Cara Crawford (Pastor).

HMC held its first Sunday morning worship service in October 2015 in Tipton MO. Members rented an old Methodist church building in town until they were able to purchase the current meeting house in Fortuna about a year later.

The charter membership was made up of 8 families coming from a number of ultra-conservative Mennonite congregations in MO and also Texas. These families shared a similar vision of having a church that would operate as a true local brotherhood and be an autonomous congregation not fettered by a hierarchical conference structure.

The Lord's goodness has been evident to HMC over the years along with accompanying joys and disappointments. In November 2021 HMC became a participating ADC congregation. ADC was a good fit for HMC because it facilitated local congregational autonomy in administration while at the same time providing broader identity and fellowship opportunities along with shared values.

Fortuna is located in central MO and has geographically been part of a fairly large Mennonite community since the mid-1800s. This community is commonly referred to as the Versailles Mennonite community. Fortuna is the next town north of Versailles.

HMC is assisting a new church plant, Bethesda Mennonite Church, in downtown St. Louis. This work has been ongoing for a number of years and began as a children's ministry.

From Pastor Leonard – "We love visitors and welcome you to come worship with us, 10:00 AM every Sunday morning."

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