

## LEADING CONGREGATIONS IN CONFLICTED TIMES

By Titus Presler

“What do you think is going to happen?” is a question I hear often in discussions of the aftermath of the sexuality decisions of the 2003 General Convention. “I don’t know,” is the most frequent and the most answer honest answer. So this is an uncertain time.

All times are uncertain in that we cannot know the future. Strategic planning in congregations, though, is based on a discernment of what’s happening in the town or city, what trajectories are developing, and how God might be calling the congregation to respond in mission.

Conflict within the church is what makes this time especially uncertain. The sexuality issue has provoked conflicts in congregations, dioceses, the Episcopal Church as a whole, and the Anglican Communion. This conflict blurs the identity of the “we” when you want to say, “We are called to participate in God’s mission in the world.” A congregation might have been planning an innovative outreach, but conflicted feelings about the Episcopal Church’s direction have sapped the commitment of key people in the initiative.

Conflict evokes fear. We fear being hurt and hurting others. We fear encounters becoming volatile. We fear taking initiative and then being left out on a limb. Ultimately, fear undermines our commitment to engaging with one another. Fear produces isolation.

What is the leadership role of vestry members in the uncertainty of this conflicted time?

A leader is a person whose presence and vision catalyze commitment and action in others. In personal presence, the leader stays engaged with people and makes a special effort to avoid isolation. In conflicted, fearful times especially, leaders need to be conveners, gathering people specifically to talk with one another across the divides of theological differences.

In this convening role, vestry members can take their cue from the church’s bishops, who in the half-year since convention have spent enormous amounts of time and energy simply gathering the people of their dioceses for conversation with one another. This ministry has been crucial in helping the church hold together as well as it has. Many congregations have undertaken similar conversations, and it’s important that vestries and clergy continue that practice as events continue to unfold. Wisely guided, conversation reduces fear, builds trust, and restores community.

In vision, the leader stays the mission course. In the midst of fear and turmoil, the leader stays deeply and passionately engaged in the mission to which God is calling the community. Seekers off the street and church members alike want to be part of communities that are doing God’s work beyond themselves — “out there in the world”

— and they get discouraged when a congregation's energies are preoccupied with internal conflicts.

At the same time, vestry members need to embrace mission *through* the current conflict, not *instead of* the current conflict. People on all sides of this conflict have important mission concerns *in* the conflict. In fact, mission concern is what makes people as passionate as they are about their views. So this is a good time to return to your parish's mission statement. Talk as a vestry and as a congregation about how your mission relates to the conflict and how you can engage God's mission *through* the dynamics of the conflict.

In presence and vision, leaders take the long view and the wide view. Taking the long view means realizing that the course of the church's current conflict will take some time. No one can say how long, but certainly years, not months. Realize that, like your diocese and the general church, your congregation's evolution over this conflict will be long-term. So pace yourself. Avoid expending all your patience and energy over a few months. Plan for staying with the issue for several years, at least. Be creative about how the congregation can move forward with the issue in spirituality, community life, education, and mission outreach.

Taking the wide view right now means staying in touch with and learning from Episcopal and Anglican companions in other places. If people in your congregation are generally of one mind, work with your rector and vestry members talking with the clergy and vestry of a differently minded congregation nearby. Take the opportunity to talk with visitors from other parts of the country.

Visitors from other parts of the Anglican Communion are especially helpful to engage, whether they're from Nigeria or Nicaragua, Canada or Cameroun. Recently a bishop from Malawi observed to me, "Colonialism had the effect of broadening our horizons, so that we in Africa had to think globally." Ironically, we within what is currently the sole global superpower can often be quite local in our perspective, and that applies to our church thinking as well as our geopolitics. Missionaries from your diocese to other parts of the world can help you gain access to viewpoints around the communion, both from their own experience and through connecting you with fellow Anglicans. Trolling the worldwide web can help you make connections and sample other perspectives.

Such presence and vision in you as a vestry member will catalyze commitment and action in your congregation. The Catechism says our mission is to "restore all people to unity with God and each another in Christ." That's reconciliation. That's what God is up to in the world. That's your leadership task in this moment.

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