

Leading into the Promised Land: Lessons Learned From Resilient Congregations

by Susan Nienaber, District Superintendent and Congregational Consultant

Much of the literature in the field of congregational conflict is focused on what causes conflict, how to prevent it, and what to do when a church is already in conflict but little has been written about congregations who have successfully recovered from extremely high levels of conflict and trauma. However, there are stories about congregations who have found their way through such difficult times and survived—even thrived afterward. In the summer of 2005, as a Senior Consultant with the Alban Institute, I led a study of 12 congregations who worked through high levels of conflict and trauma. What they have to teach us will be invaluable to countless other troubled congregations and those who work to help them.¹ By concentrating on these churches' successes, we move away from the problem-focused, deficit-based language and theories that so often frame the way we talk about conflict/trauma in churches and focus on what really worked, why it worked, and what advice these participants have for others who find themselves in similar situations. Rather than simply theorizing about conflict in churches, we can harvest the rich, relevant, actual stories and the collective wisdom of these congregations' experiences.

The 12 congregations studied represented four denominations—Episcopal, ELCA, United Methodist, and Presbyterian (PCUSA)—and each had dealt with a wide variety of issues. Six had faced the trauma of sexual misconduct by their professional staff and seven had Level 3 or 4 conflicts (according to Speed Leas model) over the leadership of their pastors. Natural and human made disasters affected three other congregations: two dealt with fires and another had experienced both a tornado and a flood after a fire. Premature deaths of staff members occurred in two other churches, one by suicide. At the same time, nearly all were feeling the ripples of other underlying issues such as alcoholism, sexual addition, harassment, major depression and anxiety disorders. And common to most was a high level of conflict.

The most commonly cited negative impact of the conflict was a loss of members. One large church lost half of its worship attendance. Another lost two-thirds of its Sunday school attendees. Also reported as significant was the overall negative impact of the conflict, which took the various forms of pain, stress, loss of spirit, negativity and uncivil behavior. Loss of staff, a sense of betrayal, erosion of trust, loss of focus on the congregation's mission and purpose, burnout, exhaustion, and feelings of demoralization were all part of these churches' experiences. But, somehow they were able to bounce back from these difficulties and re-create health and wholeness. It's important to note that these 12 congregations were not merely in remission from their difficulties where a resurfacing of their issues was only a matter of time. According to denominational executives and others working with them, these churches had experienced a deep transformation as the result of facing their troubles and working through them.²

Even though the congregations in this study were on the larger side they were not unlike most other churches. With a few exceptions, they had what you would normally expect in terms of leadership and other types of resources. They worked with what they had—themselves, mostly—and didn't give up. At the core of their success in bouncing back from their conflict, I believe, lies a simple yet profound decision: They chose to heal. They made an intentional decision to get

healthy and focused their efforts toward that goal. They saw an opportunity in their crisis and they acted upon it. One participant's advice to others was: "Look at this process as part of an opportunity to grow the lay leadership, the leadership of the pastor and the governing board. The lessons to be learned are numerous and invaluable." What this tells me is that any congregation has the capacity to be resilient. The lessons these congregations learned can become the tools other congregations can use in their own times of conflict.

The lay leaders of these congregations make particularly good teachers in this regard. One of the questions we asked the participants was what internal resources the congregation used in its recovery. One of the most common responses was the effectiveness of the congregation's lay leadership. While it was clear that the lay leaders involved in the study were gifted folks, many told us that nothing in their life experience had prepared them for the difficulties their congregations experienced and that they had to learn their way through the crisis. What they learned—and demonstrated—will be of help to any congregation addressing its own conflict. The following traits and practices of these lay leaders were especially significant to their congregations' healing process.

Facing Pain

These lay leaders were willing to confront difficult and painful realities. They knew they couldn't deny the issues or sweep things under the rug. They learned that they had to confront the brutal facts of what was happening and find appropriate ways to name the issues. As one lay leader advised: "Don't ever be afraid of openness. Determine the issues early on and create vehicles to talk about them. Don't allow strong feelings to go underground and fester."

The importance of acknowledging the issues was critical in breaking through a level of denial or, in one clear case, the covering up of possible child molestation. The lay leaders in this congregation had already seen the devastation caused by the unwillingness of their former pastor to disclose the suspected abuse. "It was awful," one participant said. "The congregation broke into factions. This guy [the perpetrator] was arrested in another state in a new incident of abuse but was not convicted. I'm a teacher and one day we were having an in-service at the school on reporting abuse. The police officer told the story of a huge cover-up in a congregation in our community. I was horrified. I knew it was our church and that some of us had to step up and deal honestly with the issues." Another congregation in the study, which had also experienced sexual misconduct, chose to put out a press release. They wanted everyone to be on the same page with the same information.

Certainly there are times when some details of what has occurred in a congregation cannot be made public, but these leaders were willing to be open with each other and to be as transparent as they could be with the congregation. "There can be no hidden agendas. If there is cancer in your midst, you must identify it, acknowledge it, try to find consensus, and treat it," said one lay leader.

Focusing on God

The ability to stay spiritually grounded was another trait that enabled lay leaders to help their congregations heal. Many of these leaders understood the need to keep their focus and the congregation's focus on God. Many engaged in a regular practice of prayer or other spiritual disciplines, both individually and corporately, in order to stay grounded amid the turmoil and to seek God's guidance. One congregation's leaders, for example, formed prayer teams to pray for the recovery process. "I think we worshipped our way through the crisis," one leader remarked.

"It was the women's quilting group that kept me going," said associate pastor. "They were regularly present in the building, making their beautiful quilts and engaging in prayer. They were so steady and faithful. It helped to drop by and visit. They reminded me through their presence that 'this, too, shall pass.'"

"Pray, communicate, and keep praying," suggested another lay leader. "Listen, listen, listen—to your fellow followers in Christ and, more importantly, listen for the voice of God."

Keeping at It

These leaders also demonstrated patience and persistence. We discovered through our study that the average length of the recovery period, from the onset of the trauma or conflict to the final stages of recovery, was approximately 4.75 years. It took a great deal of persistence on the part of the leadership to allow the congregation to take whatever time it needed to recover. "Hang in there," one lay leader said. "Admit that recovery will be long, slow, and difficult. Don't be overly optimistic about when it will end."

There were times, though, when the persistence and patience of these leaders waned. One shared the story of getting to a point where he didn't think he could go on. He and his spouse were considering leaving the church. Then, he received a letter from his aging mother who had also experienced conflict in her church. She wrote that she knew it was difficult to keep going when things looked bleak but she urged him to stay with it and to continue to work for the best interests of the congregation and its call. "I've kept that letter to this day," the lay leader remarked. "It's what kept me going when things got really tough."

Exuding Calm

These leaders were nonreactive. They were calm—at least on the outside!

One lay leader, an attorney in his professional life, spoke about how hard it was to deal with the media frenzy regarding his church's conflict. "We were flooded with calls, as well as local and national news reporters. If a certain professional basketball player hadn't signed a multi-million-dollar contract, we would've been front page news! It took a lot for me to appear calm."

This ability to remain steady and to not take a reactive posture helped others in the congregational system maintain a sense of hope.

Listening with Care

Within the congregation, these leaders maintained this same nonreactive stance. They listened well. They didn't respond defensively, curtly, or disrespectfully. They took time to listen and practiced good empathy. "Listen and take time to truly be present. Develop trust first. Don't force an agenda going forward. Give people time to go in the new direction to which God is calling them."

Informing Others

They also communicated well. The lay leaders in our study emphasized the need to keep the congregation informed and to be as transparent as possible. The leaders communicated to the congregation through various modes of communication—newsletters, e-mail, announcements in worship, congregational gatherings and staff meetings. Except for information protected by confidentiality standards, they kept the congregation informed as to what was happening.

Several lay leaders we talked with during the study spoke about how important it was to even let the congregation know when there was no new information. One chairperson of the governing board learned that the hard way. "We were having a problem with the search process for a new pastor," he said. "It was moving more slowly than we'd hoped. I wasn't standing before the congregation frequently enough to let them know that we still didn't have any new leads. That was a mistake as it created more distrust."

Some of the leaders used the anniversary dates of the onset of the conflict and trauma as opportunities to acknowledge the congregation's progress, to keep modeling a sense of openness, and to provide a chance for members to continue to talk about difficult and painful things. This level of openness gave church members a sense of their lay leaders' honesty and integrity. It also increased their sense of being taken care of and kept in the loop during the congregation's difficult transition from brokenness to restored wholeness.

Putting the Congregation First

Another practice that made the leaders we studied so effective was that they put the best interests of the congregation first. They did not view leadership as being about their own personal or political agenda. They were not out to be heroes or to gain public recognition. The congregation's well-being, purpose, and call were most important to them. This ability to stay focused on the congregation enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of these leaders. "Find those members in the congregation who are strong, true believers and have excellent leadership skills," suggested one study participant. "They will be the ones who will keep the congregation's larger purpose before them."

Holding a Vision

Perhaps most important, the lay leaders of resilient congregations were able to provide hope through their vision. They could see the big picture. In a sense, these leaders could see the future.

They could focus not just on the crisis at hand but on the larger landscape and the greater opportunities for change that presented themselves.

As one pastor said, “It was like all of the cards got thrown up into the air when the crisis hit. The lay leaders were strong and realized that this was actually an opportunity for deeper change in the congregational dynamics. They were able to address other issues which had long been buried.”

Asking for Help

At the same time that these leaders were effective on their own in many ways, another strength they possessed was a willingness to ask for help. They weren’t committed to going it alone. They knew that they didn’t need to solely trust in their own abilities and willingly took advantage of outside resources such as the church that secured the services of a parliamentarian because its governing board meetings were so wrought with conflict.

Being Flexible

These leaders also adjusted according to what was needed. They were flexible. They were willing to try new things and to be creative. They also were able to find ways to carry on with business as usual during the crisis. “We had nothing after the fire,” one lay leader said. “We had no altar, no cross, no place to worship. Our staff had to figure out how to do their jobs living out of boxes. It was stressful but it also reminded us of what the real purpose was in our being together. Since the fire, we’re not so attached to a building anymore!”

Making Tough Decisions

Part of the job these leaders took on involved having to make tough decisions and they proved themselves up to the task, despite how wrenching the decision-making process was at times. For instance, several lay leaders agonized along with their pastor over personnel issues, including the possible termination of staff members. Nevertheless, they recognized that the health of the congregation depended on “getting the right people on the bus,” to quote author Jim Collins.

In one case, the lay leadership was involved in a decision to inform a staff member badly traumatized by the congregation’s conflict that he would have to get past the trauma in order to remain on the church’s staff. And, in one Episcopal congregation, the vestry agonized over whether to request that the bishop excommunicate a member, whose behavior was highly disruptive in the congregation’s early stages of recovery, ultimately deciding to do so. The bishop agreed and acted to excommunicate the member. “This was an incredibly difficult decision,” a lay leader in the church explained. “We had tried everything else and realized we couldn’t move forward. It was sad that this had to happen but, in the end, recovery went more quickly after that happened.”

Learning Humility

Humility was one lesson the lay leaders in our study had to learn. As one new pastor explained,

“This was a big church with lots of people and lots of resources. Before that very high level of conflict with the warring factions, folks thought they were a pretty impressive church. This is a conservative church, and when I asked the search committee what really happened here they all got quiet. Finally, the chair said, ‘We let the devil in and he really beat us up.’ This is a much more humble congregation now.”

In my consulting experience I’ve learned that it’s easy for leaders in crisis to become rigid, to get locked into positions—into their own ideas of who is to blame and what is the solution. The lay leaders who participated in the Resilient Congregations Study show us again the importance of rising above our own perceptions about what we think is happening and what might be causing the struggles. As Ron Heifetz wrote in his book *Leadership without Easy Answers*, leadership requires “time in the balcony”—time to focus on the bigger picture, time to look to God, time to get calm and find steadiness. Because of their patience, persistence, courage, and hope these leaders were able to create a container for what was happening in their congregations—a space in which to listen, to take careful action, and to look for God’s presence and guidance.

Hearing these stories has changed me. It has impacted my practice in terms of what I attend to and how I focus the attention of the leadership in the churches in which I am working. But, more importantly, what continues to move and inspire me is the image I have of myself now as the steward of these stories of recovery. They are not my stories. I don’t own them. They remain the stories of these congregations and, yet, there is a transcendent quality to them as well. These stories also now belong, in part, to other congregations who struggle and to their pastors and lay leaders who need a sense of hope—who need to know that there are other congregations who have found a path out of the wilderness and into the Promised Land.

NOTES

1. Although the sample of churches interviewed is too small to determine statistical significance, we believe the information is important enough to warrant sharing at this time. Additional follow-up studies will be necessary.
2. One of the criteria for inclusion in the study was a sense from denominational executives or others working with these congregations that they were/are experiencing deep transformation—not just another plateau before the redevelopment of their issues.