Transforming Conflict in the Local Church
by Jane Anderson

We are well aware that living in community is both a blessing and sometimes a burden. In healthy communities we find love, comfort, support, encouragement, guidance, direction, nurture and much more. But, human relationships are not always easy to navigate, either in our families or in our faith families. It is often challenging, especially in the church, to navigate the multiplicity of human needs, desires, understandings, and loyalties in our relationships expressed within the church family. Also, differences of experience and opinions about our communal spiritual life and how that is expressed in word, sacrament, symbolism and song can lead to tension and conflict in relationship within the church.

Many of us are uncomfortable when conflict arises in our families and in our family of faith. Many of us see conflict as a “bad thing.” We desperately want to tap it down, ignore it or do anything to simply make it go away. At other times, we rush to resolve it as quickly as possible so there can be peace among us once again. And sometimes, we try to find ways to manage the conflict that will allow folks to simply get along with one another and for church life to function, but the conflict is still present and may continue to affect the health and well-being of the church.

Conflict is not necessarily a “bad thing.” Conflict often reveals the depth of care and commitment that people have for one another, their faith relationship and their relationship to their community of faith. We learn a great deal about people’s ties and traditions during times of conflict. Conflict can even be a sign of health, as it may suggest that people feel safe and valued enough to share their differences.

What is unhealthy is when conflict is expressed in destructive ways. When people express themselves in ways that minimize or devalue their brother and sister in Christ, when they aggressively seek to control the situation, when they lash out in words or actions that hurt another in our faith community, then conflict is destructive.

Yet, if we can find ways to transform self-image, relationship, and action, then conflict can be a healthy part of spiritual journey. We begin by listening to one another, helping transform
perception and understanding. We commit ourselves to valuing one another and transform how we engage and act with one another respectfully. We commit ourselves to awareness, self-reflection and pursuit of learning from one another. In the midst of it all, we commit ourselves to love, grace, and reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit to lead, guide, and console us in our efforts to embody the living God.

The Conflict Transformation Team is here to help you. They are here to listen and help you discover what you need and to give you the tools you need to transform unhealthy conflict in your churches so that you together you can continue to be a bright light of Christ’s love in the world. Call your Associate Conference Minister if you would like their help.

Peace,

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