

2nd sharing: Embodying a disruptive Journey

Galatians 2:11–14

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

Myth 1: Strong, healthy churches are devoid of conflict, always working together without tension or frustration toward mutually satisfying goals.

Myth 2: Mature Christian leaders, pastors, missionaries, elders, or deacons, never have personal disputes.

Myth 3: Healthy churches can handle conflict so well that everyone is satisfied when it's resolved.

Myth 4: Peace churches know how to deal with conflict because they have accumulated experience about peace.

The biggest irony I have observed in the historic Peace Mennonite churches is that they are conflict-averse. They are strong advocates for world peace, even risking their earthly lives, yet they are clumsy at dealing with the interpersonal conflicts that occur among church members or inside the church committee rooms. For contemporary Mennonites who prioritize peace, the line between "let's maintain peace with others" and "don't rock the boat" has been blurred for quite some time.

The church without conflict does not exist. Intercultural churches are not an exception. Compared to homogeneous, mono-cultural congregations, many more complicated conflicts and tensions arise in intercultural congregations where members from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds bring their own values, preferences, and priorities into the church and do not fully compromise or negotiate. It is inevitable to see them collide and confront. Intercultural congregations are inherently unstable because they ask for greater costs to preserve solidarity and unity.

Church leaders aren't always perfect examples of Christian decorum, either. They experience discord with other leaders. These disagreements can be about doctrine, methods, personnel, personalities, or cultural misinterpretation. Depending on the leaders' stature and the context they are exposed to, these conflicts can also lead to serious schisms and divisions. It is untrue to believe that mature and competent Christian leaders never have disputes. They are all humans who fall short of perfection by nature, and their faults and mistakes can become their unavoidable reality beyond the level of their education and character.

The Antioch church was also not perfect. It was a Gentile church that welcomed everyone regardless of who they were and where they came from. Even though it was acknowledged as a model for future intercultural churches, experiencing the highest level of integration and reconciliation among members, it was not a church that was conflict-free.

While the church in Antioch effectively displayed diversity both in the congregation and in its leadership without bias or superficiality, and while society perceived it as a congregation whose principles contradicted the expectations of the contemporary Roman world, and while it successfully dispatched pioneer missionaries like Paul and Barnabas to various regions of the Roman Empire, and while it was renowned for its generosity in providing aid to the brethren residing in Judea, it was still not flawless, nor was it entirely sufficient.

Among prominent leaders of the Antioch church, there were serious conflicts, not just one but several.

For example, Paul and Barnabas debated the Judaizers who sternly asked for the circumcision of the Gentile converts (Acts 15:1). Paul confronted and accused Peter who withdrew from sitting with the Gentiles. Paul disputed with Barnabas over Mark's future accompaniment and finally parted ways with each other.

Out of these conflicts, as in today's passage in Galatians 2:11-14, Paul's head-on conflict with Peter is recorded as a good model for modern-day intercultural churches to revisit and reflect upon, whose goal is to pursue Christ-centered unity that transcends any cultural or ethnic norms.

What happened in the Antioch church?

Peter came from Jerusalem to Antioch. The first thing to note is Peter's freedom. There, he enjoyed fellowship with all the believers, Jews and Gentiles alike. To "eat with the Gentiles" meant to accept them and to put both Jews and Gentiles on an equal footing. Ephesians 3:6 supports this radical inclusion of the Gentiles: "Through the gospel, both Jews and Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus."

Who is Peter?

Raised as an observant Jew, Peter had a difficult time learning the lesson of Gentile inclusion. Jesus had taught it while He was with Peter before the Crucifixion. In Matt. 15:18–20, Jesus said, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.'" So, eating with the Gentiles should have raised no issues.

More than that, the Holy Spirit also directly intervened in Peter's life and sent him to the home of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, as is in Acts 10. Peter's encounter with Cornelius occurred before he came to Antioch. The story of Peter and Cornelius is described in Acts 10–11 comprehensively.

After the transformative events at Cornelius' house, Peter returned to Jerusalem and faced criticism from certain Jewish Christians who questioned his actions of associating with Gentiles. This provided a background for why Peter's timid withdrawal from eating with Gentiles was brought up in Antioch, as described in today's passage in Galatians 2:11–14.

Here in Peter's case in Antioch, we see human fragility and weakness. The bold faith that prompted him to walk on water by the words of the disciple whom Jesus loved in John 21:7 was long gone. Now he was swayed by peer pressure to conform to the Jewish law. What kind of man was Peter?

Peter had a close personal relationship with Jesus and played a significant role in the formation and leadership of the early Christian community in Jerusalem. He preached and performed miracles, and his sermon on the day of Pentecost led to the conversion of thousands. What is more important is that he met the resurrected Jesus and exchanged the

covenant of love with Him not once but three times. And he was finally endorsed by the resurrected Jesus as a man to feed Jesus' sheep, His people.

Peter, without a doubt, was a bold and confident witness of Jesus and his Spirit, but he now faced confrontation and opposition from Paul for his withdrawal from eating with Gentiles, which threatened to compromise the gospel: "You are not in step with the truth of the Gospel! You are a hypocrite!"

Where could we find harsher words for the pillar of the church, Peter, to hear? Paul described Peter's racially prejudiced behaviour as a contradiction to Jesus' teaching in Ephesians 2:14; 3:14-15: "Jesus himself is our peace...and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles, and he has united them "before Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named."

Paul, who had risked his life to carry the Gospel of God's grace to the regions beyond, now emphasized that acceptance by God comes only through one's faith in Jesus Christ, not through observing Jewish laws or customs (or tacit Mennonite ways). Through Jesus alone, we can become His followers and participate in the Christian communion, a common meal open to anyone who comes to Christ. Christ alone is sufficient for our life and salvation. Christ alone is the center to which we should look. If we, who have no authority, set any kind of boundary that deters people, old and young and new, from participating in fellowship with others, it is no different from acting in discordance with the very truth of the Gospel as Paul warned against Peter's withdrawal.

It's important to recognize that the incident described reflects an internal conflict within the early Christian community and does not entirely represent Peter's stance on Gentile inclusion. Fortunately, Peter later played a pivotal role in advocating for the inclusion of Gentiles into the Christian faith, as evidenced by his speech at the Jerusalem council in Acts 15. Through his impassioned plea, the truth of the inclusive gospel was embraced and endorsed by the assembled leaders in Jerusalem. Peter even referred to Paul as a "dear brother" and acknowledged his wisdom, highlighting their mutual respect and appreciation. The resolution of the conflict between Peter and Paul demonstrates that reconciliation and progress are possible even in the face of fierce disagreements.

As exemplified by the Antioch church, conflict within intercultural congregations can stem from various factors such as cultural differences, communication barriers, differing perspectives, and misunderstandings. It's crucial to understand that conflict is inevitable and that a healthy church isn't defined by the absence of conflict but by how it addresses, confronts, and resolves issues while maintaining humility and focus on its mission. In his seminal book *Care Enough to Confront*, a well-known Mennonite theologian and pastor David Augsburger says, "Creative living is care-fronting in conflict." Yes, conflict is a thing to confront and care not to avoid or retreat.

Here is his advice for you:

When we conflict:

I want conflict to call out the best in myself and others. I want to negotiate differences with others in clear, respectful, truthful ways of hearing, speaking and acting. I want both the truth as I see it and respect for the other to be clear in my responses—verbal and nonverbal.

When situations of conflict become difficult, I want to first listen attentively, openly, respectfully, and in a way that validates the other's right to a different perspective, different values, different interests, and goals. When it is appropriate for me to speak, I want to do so clearly, honestly, directly, and in simple statements. This provides the greatest impact with the least confusion and distortion. I may or may not be able to break through the walls blocking our mutual understanding, but I can express both love and truth best by refusing to get caught in the many communication traps, potholes, detours, and dead-ends such as the "whys" and the "it's your faults" and "you must change first" strategies.

I want to love truthfulness in our relationship because only then can I truly love you. In speaking truthfully, I welcome you to the sacred room in my soul where the most important truths about my life are kept. The truths that nourish trust relationships are shaped only by authentic self-disclosure. "All truth is self-disclosure."

Intercultural churches should not shy away from dealing with conflicts but see them as opportunities for growth and development. Avoiding conflict is not a solution; rather, it's a missed opportunity for constructive dialogue and resolution, it is a cop-out. By embracing conflicts with confidence and seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit, intercultural churches

can navigate challenges and work towards building a harmonious, inclusive, and redemptive community.

Conflict serves as a sign of vitality and engagement within a church.

Remember, a church that is pronounced dead does not experience conflict.

Even amid turmoil and uncertainty, even amid intolerable tensions, and fears, even on a journey to the unknown, the uncertain, God remains ever present, guiding us towards reconciliation and unity in Christ. As we continue our disruptive journey, let us face conflicts with open arms. Furthermore, let us anticipate and embrace them, recognizing that through these challenges, God works for our ultimate goodness and the reconciliation of all peoples. Thanks be to God!

Questions

- 1. Identifying and articulating conflicts can often be the most challenging aspect of navigating through them. Can you recall instances within your church community where conflicts were clearly and accurately described, as well as situations where conflicts were poorly articulated?*
- 2. Reflecting on these scenarios, how did the clarity or lack thereof in articulating the conflict impact the outcomes?*
- 3. Furthermore, consider how the resolution process differed between conflicts that were well-defined and cared for and those that were glossed over. In what ways does this process compare to how Paul and Peter resolved their conflicts head-on?*