

# CONFESSION & FORGIVENESS: Making Conflict a Catalyst for Growth

By Todd Svanoë for *Journey*, an adult faith-based curriculum

Randal brakes, screeching into the driveway, and finds the kids, dressed in their Sunday finest, lined up and waiting to jump into the car. This is the price he has to pay for trying to squeeze in a trip to the health club before Sunday worship.

Sandy, tense and shaking her head, asks Randal if he has the check for the offering. He says no, at which point she begins to give him the silent treatment. She doesn't need to say it. He can read the anger waves: "We're late again, and we'll be even later, because now we'll have to park in the ramp."

Halfway to church, he realizes he should have apologized right up front. The longer he waits, the harder it becomes.

They arrive at church at 9:18 a.m. and thankfully, there's a spot left in the parking lot. Randal feels vindicated—strangely, since the service has already begun—and thinks now maybe everything will be okay.

To get a decent seat, however, each family member has to hurdle the man at the end of the pew who won't move down to make room. A woman in front of them turns around, the first of three times during the service, and, as Sandy recounts it, "gives her whispering children the hairy eyeball." Sandy refuses to sign the friendship pad, assuming their names would be added to someone's black list.

After the service, the entire family seeks solace in the friendship of another young family. Suddenly, in the middle of the conversation Sandy nearly shouts: "Randal, the car!" She remembers that the car is blocking third service traffic. She runs out the door with the keys, and is greeted by a honking horn. Now, she's really ready to tell somebody off.

## THE LITURGY COMING ALIVE

During the morning worship, Randal and Sandy confessed their sins and received God's absolution, but their conflict was far from resolved and they were still unreconciled to each other. As a result, after the service, anger still spilled over to people they encountered. Mercy was in short supply.

Our liturgical confession during the Sunday worship service is by no means a mere formality, and we take great comfort in the fact that at times like this, "God, who is faithful and just, will forgive us our sins," The confession and absolution in the service does not replace the daily practice of confession and forgiveness with both those who offend us and those whom we offend, but rather encourages it. In fact, Jesus saw corporate and interpersonal confession as integrally-related:

*So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (Matt. 5:23)*



As long as they were unreconciled to each other, a dark cloud hung over Randal and Sandy's heads and they felt cut off from God. This type of circumstantial grievance, which may linger only a few hours, is nothing compared to more deeply-held grudges. This story reminds us of the dark cloud which may still hang over us because of a hurtful comment a fellow church member made, a pastoral visit which was missed, or a resentment from years of unrecognized Christian service.

So serious is unconfessed sin and so great its ability to degrade our fellowship, that Jesus addresses us from every angle, first in Matthew 5:23 (above) as the potential offender and then in Matthew 6:14-15 as the one offended:

*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

In every case, we are told to take the initiative to mend the breach. In doing so, Jesus says, the integrity of our relationship with God will also be restored.

### **CONFESSION AS THERAPY MISSES THE MARK**

If mustering the courage to honestly discuss our grievances is half the challenge of conflict resolution, making thorough restoration is the other half. In *Beyond Identity*, Dick Keyes notes several ways the act of interpersonal confession itself can be abused, making it merely a hollow exercise. He warns against using confession as:

- 1) **A catharsis.** Confession to relieve my own feelings of guilt.
- 2) **A mechanical exercise.** Confession as a ritual whose function is to get me off the hook.
- 3) **An exhibition.** Confession to display my piety or rally others' pity.
- 4) **An act of cowardice.** Confession, even when I did nothing wrong, out of fear of losing a friend or gaining an enemy.

Confession and forgiveness in a Christian fellowship, says Keyes, has but one purpose: the reconciliation of people who have been alienated from one another, inasmuch as possible leaving no stone unturned. The classic picture of full restoration is portrayed in the story of the Prodigal son. He decides to confess that he has squandered his inheritance and returns, head hanging, expecting to work as one of his father's servants. (Luke 15:19) Instead, his father runs to him, throws his arms around him, kisses him, drapes him with his best robe, gives him a ring and sandals and celebrates with a feast.

Through three stories in Luke 15, Jesus teaches his disciples to respond to a repentant sinner not merely with "I forgive you," but with rejoicing and the bounty of God's grace.

### **"FORGIVE AND FORGET" IS TOO SIMPLE**

The common understanding and practice of forgiveness is often more shallow than the mercy-giving that Jesus practiced and prescribed. Forgiveness is not simply overlooking a wrong, trying to forget about it, or saying you forgive someone when you really don't, says UW-Madison professor Robert Enright, who founded the International Forgiveness Institute in Madison.



Instead, it is:

*... the willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her.*

At first, this seems too difficult. Many offenses are severe, such as child abuse, rape, adultery, or murder. Is reconciliation possible in these instances? What about the 20,000 blacks in South Africa who in 1998 told their country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the horrendous violence and mutilation of their loved ones? Would anyone suggest that they "forgive and forget" and love their perpetrators?

### **IS RECONCILIATION ALWAYS POSSIBLE?**

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who presided over the South African commission, would join Enright in advocating a depth of forgiveness that is capable of beginning a process of healing.

Forgiving someone does not absolve them from the just consequences of their actions, nor does it require one to like the perpetrator. Furthermore, reconciliation may not be possible, especially if the other person refuses to change or remains untrustworthy. But vengeance—no matter how severe the offense—only brings victims down with their perpetrators, keeping them shackled in bitterness, anger and hatred, emotions which are useless as ends in themselves. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."

Forgiveness may give the perpetrator their only opportunity to turn from their evil ways. God has given us unusual power, when we are wronged, to chain or release a person from his or her past, to dissolve or inflame the cycle of evil and suffering.

Without the cross of Christ, such forgiveness of deep hurt would, for most of us, be unimaginable. In fact, it may be that the only thing sufficient to motivate us to forgive more flagrant offenses is our identification with God's larger purposes in "reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). It is in Jesus' initiative to "love the enemy" and even to die in order to forgive the sins of the world, that those who follow him find direction. Though it is difficult, we are asked to be not only admirers of his sacrificial example, but followers of it. (1 Peter 2:21)

### **CAN SOME STRESS AND CONFLICT BE AVOIDED?**

In the day-to-day life of the church, some of our suffering is brought on ourselves. In the opening story, Randal, for example, could have left for the club 30 minutes earlier or chosen some form of exercise he could do at home. Sandy could have expressed her anger more directly and constructively. Randal could have apologized on the spot.

The normal stresses of personal or family life are only multiplied in a multi-individual, multi-family church community. The question is not will our fellowship experience stress or conflict, but what can we do to respond to conflict when it arises? Bethel member and psychologist Arden Mahlberg makes several suggestions to help us better negotiate conflict and avert interpersonal crises:



### **Helpful responses to conflict:**

- 1) accept individual differences, learn to see them as interesting and helpful
- 2) express emotions with care
- 3) be objective toward all parties and issues
- 4) clarify what is going on and name the source of the distress
- 5) assume the possibility of a win-win resolution

### **Unhelpful reactions to conflict:**

- 1) fear—withdrawal, denial, hope it goes away
- 2) fix it—try to solve the problem before understanding if there really is a problem to be solved
- 3) placate and "people please," i.e. give in to the person complaining
- 4) polarize—take a side
- 5) get defensive, take disagreement personally
- 6) intimidate, use extreme emotions

Building strong relationships in the church, as in marriage or a family, is hard work. But if we take the long view and commit ourselves to working through our difficulties, we will begin to see that conflict can become a catalyst for growth.

## **TRUST AND COVENANT**

Relationships are more likely to weather storms and grow in the context of a mutually-understood commitment or covenant. This is only natural. Romantic relationships and even business relationships are inevitably characterized by insecurity and distrust until partners are married or a contract is signed and we agree together, at least roughly, what we are to be about.

The ideals of sharing our failings, working through struggles and bearing each other's burdens remain unfulfilled rhetoric until we learn to trust one another, and that trust grows best in the context of commitment. According to Elizabeth O'Connor:

*Where commitment is not tentative we become free to act and to speak. We can take risks that we could not take... We can afford to, express negative reactions...if we know our words do not cut us off. We can choose to express anger and...take the risk of telling a brother what stands between us, if we know there will be another time when we are together, and that (everything) does not depend on what does or does not happen in this moment.*

*The temptation to withdraw will be (greatest) at the crisis points in our relationships—at times of real confrontation or at times when we see nothing happening...We will rationalize that it is unprofitable to stick with this particular (group) when there are more congenial people and more congenial circumstances in other places—'people who think the way I think and feel like I feel.'*



In reality, says O'Connor, we don't really want the boredom of being surrounded only by people who think and feel like we do. Moreover, when we seek such a group, we can be sure that the next group will have people who agitate us just as much.

This "revolving door syndrome" has produced in some quarters Christians who say that the church is simply a place where two or more are gathered in Christ's name. (Matthew 18:20) But O'Connor rejects that notion.

*We gather in that Name when -with other faltering, estranged persons we agree to live a life in depth, which means learning something about forgiveness and what it means to be forgiven. It means staying locked in a concrete, given web of relationships until we come to know ourselves as belonging to one another and belonging to the Body of Jesus Christ.*