

Dealing with Conflict on Fundamental Issues
within the Congregation

Leadership UMC 2011 Final Report

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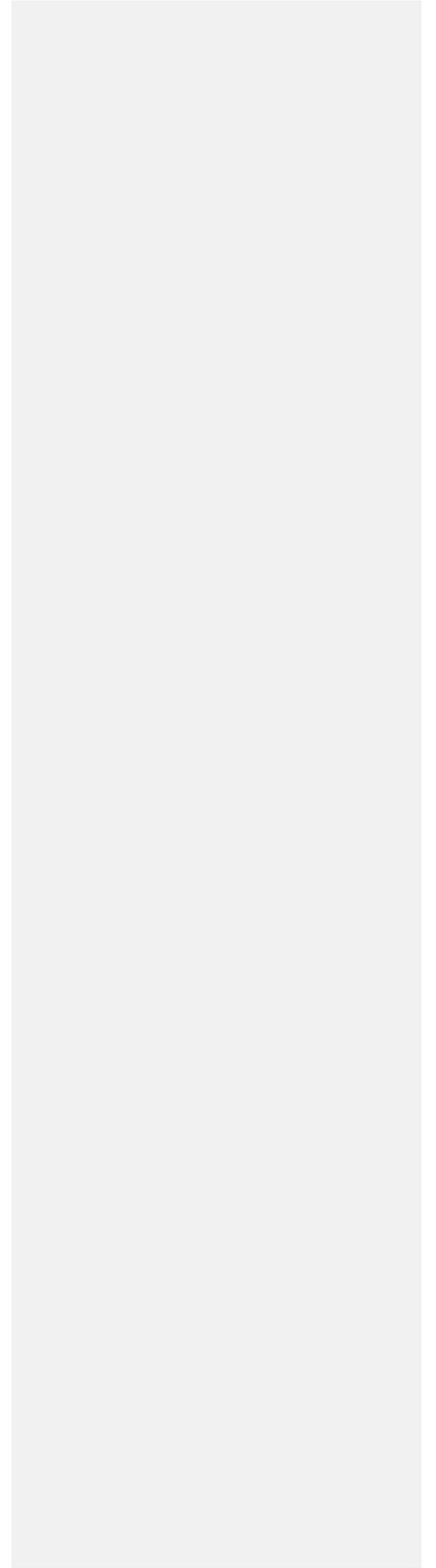
Executive Summary

We are pleased to present the following document highlighting conflict on fundamental issues in the congregation. This report highlights four areas of potential conflict in the church: abortion, addiction, hatred, and bereavement. In selecting these areas, team members considered not only areas of tension on social issues in broader American culture that may influence interactions in the church, but also their own personal experiences as members of the United Methodist Church. Thus, this report includes recommendations for future action and ministry within the UM Church based on resources that are currently available to members (or not) and the personal testimonies of team members.

Conflict in the church dates back to the disciples who disagreed about who would be the first in the kingdom of God. Conflict, including conflict on the issues presented previously, is inevitable even within the church. As highlighted in this report, conflict in the church in today's society may influence whether or not we as individuals or congregations speak openly about certain issues, provide services and ministry to those in need, or make individuals feel welcome in our local churches. How we as Christians address with these conflicts is incredibly important. Conflict that is ill managed can lead to bitterness, isolation, and separation from the church in some instances—none of which is helps to further God's kingdom.

The team strongly believes that entire congregation, both laity and clergy, have a role to play in effectively addressing conflict on the aforementioned issues. While there are a number of documents available to guide the church in addressing these issues (e.g., the Bible, Book of Discipline), there is also a need for individual members of the church to understand and readily assume their roles in helping to build a stronger church community by working to improve

communication, knowledge and ministry in these areas that reaches all people. We hope that the testimonies and recommendations shared in this report inspires action from all members of the North Georgia Conference.



Introduction

Congregations represent a diverse group of people who bring to the Body of Christ a multitude of experiences and opinions—this is in short, the beauty of the Church and a potential source of conflict within congregations. Fortunately, we have guiding documents such as the Bible and The Book of Discipline (including Social Principles) available to us to aid in carrying out God’s mission for the church in an orderly and loving manner. These documents take into account how we, as Christians, should treat others in life.

As United Methodists, we must need to demonstrate and live by these principles daily, in all situations and with all people. Regardless of someone’s sexuality, race/ethnicity, life choices (e.g., abortion, addiction) or experiences (e.g., bereavement); it is through our demonstration of brotherly love that we help our fellow man and advance God’s kingdom on earth. Still, even as Christians, we are human. While the diversity of our experiences and opinions are beautiful and unique, they can and do make it difficult for us to abide as one body by the instructions set before us by God.

In the following pages, we highlight areas of conflict on fundamental issues in congregations. Some of these issues are controversial (e.g., addiction, abortion) while others like bereavement are less viewed as less contentious, but still not adequately addressed. We provide recommendations based on personal testimonies, current ministries and activities within and outside of the UM Church, and propose solutions to aid congregations, laity and clergy, in moving forward on these important issues. Through effective communication and conversation with one another and through the building of a stronger church community where all individuals are respected, we can better ensure that the church is a place where “all persons [are] equally

valuable in the sight of God [and where] we therefore work toward societies in which each person's value is recognized, maintained, and strengthened" (Book of Resolutions, 2004, ¶ 162).

Abortion

The Problem

“Hush, hush, this is not something that will be discussed or addressed in this church”.

A teen sitting in your church may be thinking about getting an abortion, made up their mind to get an abortion or have gone through with it already. In the United States, the abortion rate for teens has remained relatively unchanged in recent years however the rate at which abortions occur is still cause for concern. In 2007, the abortion rate for teens 19 years of age or younger was 10.7 abortions per 1,000; girls 18-19 years account the largest percentage of abortions 62%. While the number of teens who have contemplated abortion, but have not gone through with the procedure is not known, one would assume that that number is much higher.

There are many situations and conflicts, including abortion, which people are dealing with in the church that may not be addressed effectively, if at all. Often the criticism, judgment, and lack of sympathy that people encounter is from fellow Christians. The Church has not been a safe outlet of understanding for socially charged issues such as abortion that have a substantial social, emotional, and spiritual impact on the lives of individuals. As such, during times, of need individuals may find that there is a lack of openness, understanding, or nurturing in order to help heal wounds from which they have are afflicted.

The Church should be able to meet people at their point of need. The Church has to be willing to allow voices to be heard, a place for hearts to open up, and love to flow into their lives so Jesus Christ is evident, and the world knows without a doubt the church is what it preaches; pulling on its resources for aiding and assisting everyone based on their need. One must

understand the church is only able to do so much with the resources within the church. One church may not be able to meet every need head on **alone**.

Everybody has to know

People are ashamed and afraid to allow their closet experiences, or the baggage they are carrying to in any way consume them, burden them, or allow them to feel any worse than they are. We would rather keep it to ourselves versus finding the true source of forgiveness and salvation—God.

This means knowing and acknowledging that God is always with us, protecting us and watching over us. No matter how great the storm, how deep the river or how dark the night we are always safe in his arms. “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned: the flames will not set you ablaze” (Isaiah 43:2). There are days, times and those circumstances when we need to know and remember that God is always there with us. When faced with overwhelming circumstances, challenges, situations for which there are no easy answers we need to remember that God is always there with us, loving us, guiding us, helping us to know we are safely and securely held in his arms.

All we need to know is that we are held safely and securely in the arms of a loving and caring God. God never forgets us. God never leaves us alone. God never abandons us. When you have difficult decisions to make cling to God. When you find yourself in deep water, reach for the arms of God. When you face challenges, seek safety in God (1 Peter 2:9).

UMC Position on Abortion

In addition to individual relationships with God, it is important to acknowledge the church’s stance on abortion. The following is a review of some of the major **denominations** and their

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positions and activities on abortion and related issues. Some are based on official church documents and some are based on observable activities and statements of some church leaders. Prior to the 1960s, virtually all religious denominations in America opposed the legalization of abortion and considered abortion except to save the life of the mother as a grievous sin.

The United Methodist Church began in the early 1970s to view abortion as a "choice". The United Methodist position in favor of abortion has been so strong that two of its institutions helped organize and affiliate with the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights (RCAR). For many years, RCAR used office space in the United Methodist Building located across the street from the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1996 and 1997, the United Methodist Church publicly supported President Clinton's veto of the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act. The 1996 United Methodist Church's Book of Discipline still maintains a strong pro-abortion position, it now includes wording recognizing the "sanctity of unborn human life." It further states, "We cannot affirm abortion as an acceptable means of birth control and we unconditionally reject it as a means of gender selection."

The UMC's official positions on both issues are articulated in the Social Principles as found in the 2008 United Methodist Book of Discipline. Regarding Abortion, Paragraph 161.J states:

"Our belief in the sanctity of unborn human life makes us reluctant to approve abortion. But we are equally bound to respect the sacredness of the life and well-being of the mother and the unborn child. We recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion, and in such cases we support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures. We support parental, guardian, or other responsible adult notification and consent before abortions can be performed on girls who have not yet reached the age of legal adulthood. We cannot affirm

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abortion as an acceptable means of birth control, and we unconditionally reject it as a means of gender selection. We oppose the use of late-term abortion known as dilation and extraction (partial-birth abortion) and call for the end of this practice except when the physical life of the mother is in danger and no other medical procedure is available, or in the case of severe fetal anomalies incompatible with life. Before providing their services, abortion providers should be required to offer the woman the option of anesthesia. We call all Christians to a searching and prayerful inquiry into the sorts of condition that may cause them to consider abortion. The Church shall offer ministries to reduce unintended pregnancies.

We commit our Church to continue to provide nurturing ministries to those who terminate a pregnancy, to those in the midst of a crisis pregnancy, and to those who give birth. We particularly encourage the Church, the government, and the social services agencies to support and facilitate the option of adoption. We affirm and encourage the Church to assist the ministry of crisis pregnancy centers and pregnancy resource centers that compassionately help women find feasible alternatives to abortion."

¶ 161 **K**) Ministry to Those Who Have Experienced an Abortion—We urge local pastors to become informed about the symptoms and behaviors associated with post-abortion stress. We further encourage local churches to make available contact information for counseling agencies that offer programs to address post-abortion stress for all seeking help (The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2008, ¶ 161).

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WHEREAS, we recognize that there is a legal right to an abortion, we also recognize that some regret that event later in life,

WHEREAS, the church should be about offering healing ministries for all types of brokenness, Therefore, be it resolved that the 2004 General Conference of The United Methodist Church urge pastors to become informed about the symptoms and behaviors associated with post-abortion stress; and

Be it further resolved that the 2004 General Conference of The United Methodist Church encourage local churches to make available contact information for counseling agencies that offer programs to address post-abortion stress for all seeking help (The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 2004, resolution #124, See Social Principles, ¶ 162V).

~~ADOPTED 2004~~

~~resolution #124, 2004 book of resolutions~~

~~See Social Principles, ¶ 162V.~~

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Margaret H. Sikes

In other action, the 2008 United Methodist General Conference adopted a statement on abortion that adds language offering “ministries to reduce unintended pregnancies” and to assist the ministry of crisis pregnancy and support centers that help women “find feasible alternatives to abortion.”

The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church first dealt with abortion in 1972. The church does not approve of abortion but “respects the sacredness of the life and well-being of the

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mother and the unborn child.”

Found in the Book of Discipline, the Social Principles are a "prayerful and thoughtful effort on the part of the General Conference to speak to the human issues in the contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation as historically demonstrated in United Methodist traditions." The General Conference amended the 1972 statement on abortion in 1976, 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996 and 2000.

Programs within the UMC

An estimated 4,000 per day abortions take place in the United States. Our job as Christians is to inform our people before one decides to have an abortion, but it is just as important to be informed about the decision that has been made after a person has one also.

There are a many programs outside the church that have pre and post abortive healing ministries.

Grace Abounds is such one ministry for men and women dealing with the aftermath of abortion.

It is a safe place to begin sifting through the emotions of guilt and shame and embrace God's grace, healing and restoration. For women there are two avenues of support. The first is a post-abortion Bible study held periodically throughout the year that walks through the study *Forgiven and Set Free*. This group is intended to be small in number so that each woman can go as deep as is needed. The second avenue of support offered is one-on-one meetings from another woman who has walked through the aftermath of abortion and can offer you a listening ear, compassion, prayer and encouragement as you seek healing. For men who have been involved in an abortion experience or have supported an abortion, they offer one-on-one support from other men who have walked this road and can offer truth and encouragement as they seek healing.

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Out of the 25 local United Methodist Churches I contacted for this report, 7 have ministries for supporting and assisting members through difficult times. The ministries help members according to their need. Such ministries include NOW (Nurturing) ministries, Courtesy ministries, Crisis and Care ministries. Of the 15 South Georgia United Methodist Churches, five had ministries for supporting and assisting members through difficult times, but none specific to abortion.

Recommendations

Often pastors are reluctant to have their churches get involved in pro-life ministry, but I think one way to bridge this gap is to reach out and dialogue with them. People need to be encouraged to get involved. Our pastors should speak about abortion to their congregations because given that just as many professed Christian women have abortions as those who have no religious affiliation. If you could take a survey of your congregation, I think you would be shocked to find out that there are numerous women sitting there in front of you who have had abortions. Abortion is a solution being sought by all women, whether they go to church or not. It is the act of desperation of someone who has been sexually active when they should not and have got caught. Rather than face the embarrassment of the pregnancy or the inconvenience of a pregnancy, or the prospect of a child who is considered a burden at this point in their life, they are choosing abortion as the solution to their problem.

Discussions on fundamental topics that teens and young adults are dealing with and will face as they approach adulthood are a place great start. Begin in youth group discussions on many topics such as abstinence, drug use, hatred. In many churches it maybe being addressed, but not in a manner that connects with young people. Pastors need to speak about abortion and related topics such as unintended pregnancy, but they should receive training in these areas first.

This would include training in the extent of abortion, rationale seeking or having an abortion, and emotional turbulence that accompanies the decision to have to consider or have an abortion. Pastors should be aware of the resources outside of the church that are available both for women considering abortions and for those who have had abortions and make the appropriate referrals. Pastors will need to deal with the issue of abortive fathers too. So there are men sitting in the churches who will need to confess their sins too. Pastors will need to speak loudly because then they can offer some help to those wounded women sitting in the pews, who will feel convicted at the mention of abortion. They need to extend the offer of unconditional acceptance of these women, and they need to set in place some way to deal with the numbers who are wounded. I am sure many would be surprised at the number, but the good that would come from the sermons, the talks in workshops, and the ministries that support groups of this kind.

If one pastor with a congregation of 100, finds two of his elders have had abortions, how many more women in that congregation have had abortions? In a mega church, like the ones in Ventura, CA, how many women there would have had abortions? Possibly hundreds. ~~These guys need to get their heads out of the sand on the issue of abortion. Abortion is breaking the heart of God, and it is time that our spiritual leaders did something about it.~~ As one woman who had an abortion said, "if the churches are silent on abortion, that tells me and other women that the sin of abortion is unforgiveable; if they can't even mention it, then it must be the one sin we cannot even bring to the Cross."

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Addiction

The Problem

Sssshhhh! Be quiet. Some of us in the United Methodist Church have a secret. It involves our brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, and our children. We search for answers but the answer is hard to find.

There are those among us carrying the burden of having a family member who has an addiction to drugs. These drugs can be legal and illegal drugs, the outcome to families are the same. If the shame of addiction is not enough; how about the shame of the lifestyle associated with addiction? There is homelessness, prostitution, and every other vile thing a good church person runs and avoids. There is dirt and smells that make you want to vomit. There are sores, illnesses, and physical pain. There is crime, beatings, and all types of violence. What people do not understand is the lost of trust and betrayal that comes along with drug addiction. I spoke to a woman who shared her story. Her story involved her daughter who was homeless and an addict for many years. She went on to explain how her daughter was lost in this world of addiction. Her daughter is one of the blessed ones. Her daughter is alive. She survives today loved by the mother who prays for her constantly. I told her that her daughter was a gift and she should cherish her, still, the fear remains with the loving mother. She never said she was afraid, but I know for a fact that she fears for her daughter's safety and wellbeing. How do I know? I have a mother who was afraid every day. Afraid when the phone rang she would get the news her oldest son (my brother) was dead. Everyone in my family had this unspoken fear that we never discussed. In the summer of 2005 the call came. With sadness and anger we laid our beloved brother and son to rest. Yet, we carried our conflict unable to shake it off.

Addiction is the silent killer. It is killing our society. It is killing our families. It is a complicated issue and that requires enormous resources to overcome. A quick search on the internet will reveal a residential drug rehab program will cost you from \$3000 dollars to \$7000 dollars a month. Imagine having to pay this for a family member, someone who has stolen from you already. Stolen money you had hidden for a rainy day. You come in and your TV is gone and sold so he or she could get a fix. Many families simply cannot afford to deal with the problem and so it goes on for years silently inside and outside of the church.

I saw a sign in front of one of the churches in my community it read, "Come, all are welcome." I wonder if we really dumped our baggage at the front door and told people what was really going on in our lives would we be welcome? Churches are ill prepared to deal with addiction and the consequences. Some churches do have wonderful support programs for families. The problem is the silence. However, individuals may be afraid to tell their story (testimony) for fear of being judged.

The Answer

"For what if some were without faith? shall their want of faith make of none effect the faithfulness of God? 4a God forbid: yea, let God be found true," (The Bible, Romans 3:3, NLT).

I have spent years trying to make sense out of untimely passing of my brother, Mike. The answer I was looking for was not one I could see or touch, but an answer that would touch my heart and bring comfort. I found my answer one day just by talking about what had happened. Maybe I was tired of keeping my secret. Maybe I was broken down and didn't care who knew and who judged. I shared my story with a group of six and an unseen seventh revealed himself to me (Jesus) and showed me His faithfulness. The people surrounding me

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looked at me in love and I understand the conflict was in the fact I had never shared my story and my pain. I then realized my selfishness in holding on and not letting go of the pain.

Romans 3:3 sums up how God is with us no matter what. It might seem simple but through my pain I was unable to see God's faithfulness, NLT.

In attending a recent youth confirmation class the question was asked of the group, "What are things we as a church can do to bring healing to our community?" A young person whose mother is a drug addict spoke up and said we should support our community by having some instruction about what drugs can do to your family.

John Wesley spoke a great deal about abstaining from drinking alcohol. What would Wesley say today? I cannot help to think of Wesley's three rules as explained in the UMC Book of Discipline 103 page 73. "First: By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind...; "Second: By... doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all...; "Third: By attending upon all the ordinance of God" or what I always say Love God with everything you are. These three rules, if applied to the problem of addiction in our churches and communities, give us one important direction. Wesley pointed out our Heavenly Father as the only answer needed. When people do not have the capacity or resources to deal with an issue all we have is God. I believe that the Church's greatest asset is the ability to turn to our Lord for direction and when required, miracles.

The Church should confront the evil and give information to our young and old about the realities of drugs and alcohol and other addictions, Wesley's first rule. People can reach out to the addicted and show them kindness. Showing kindness may extend their life one more day, Wesley's second rule. The Great Commission is about showing God's love to others. We can do that by telling those who are the least among us WE LOVE YOU! To do this we might have

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to hang around some places we normally would not go. My brother who was homeless stayed and slept where ever he could. When he passed away I went with my father to the last place he slept and collected his things. I was horrified by what I saw. My brother died alone but my mother did tell him she loved him the last time she saw him, Wesley's third rule.

Recommendations

There are congregations within the North Georgia Conference who are tackling the issues related to addiction in the aforementioned manner—talking about the issues, showing kindness and bringing people throughout the community together to support those addicted and their families. One excellent example is the partnership with Faith Partners Inc that Snellville UMC has established (http://gbgm-umc.org/global_news/full_article.cfm?articleid=5653). This ministry focuses on the awareness, prevention, and recovery of addictions of all types. The ministry was officially launched in 2008, after one member of the congregation who had experienced the addiction of her own grandson felt the calling to help other individuals and families in need. The program is open to community and congregation members, both those struggling with addiction and their families. Discussion topics focus on issues behaviors resulting from the disease and addictions, addictions and families, patterns of denial, and substance-abuse prevention for adolescents. Community leaders are also a part of the conversation. For example, each year during National Recovery Month, the Faith Partners ministry hosts an annual Community Forum on Substance Abuse, co-sponsored by the City of Snellville Police Department, at Snellville's City Hall. Through the ministry the church has also developed a support group which two times per month meets twice a month to offer support and prayer to individuals and families affected by addictions. These meetings include facilitated discussion focusing on the current needs of group members, as well as a discussion of learning and

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experience gained from previous educational sessions. Additionally, Snellville UMC hosts a Narcotics Anonymous group each week at the church. More recently, the founders of the national Faith Partner Ministry, Trish Merrill, co-authored a book entitled Healing Places which provides keen insight regarding how facilitators in local churches can promote addiction awareness among congregational members, provide referral information and support for individuals and families afflicted and affected by alcoholism and drug addiction. For more information about Faith Partners Inc and how to establish a partnership in your local church please visit: <http://faith-partners.org/>.

This program falls under a larger initiative of the UM Church known as the Program on Substance Abuse and Related Violence (SPSARV) which was established in 1992 at General Conference. It is a partnership to build support for team ministries in all five US jurisdictions. SPSARV includes collaboration with a number of other general boards including the general boards of Global Ministries, Church and Society, Discipleship, and Higher Education and Ministry, and the General Commission of Religion and Race.

Overarching goals of the initiative include the presence of the following:

- Local churches displaying literature on alcohol and other drugs in their vestibules
- Conference media centers equipped with resources on alcohol and other drugs
- Pastoral leadership delivering sermons on addiction and family systems
- Congregants feel comfortable in church sharing their struggles with addiction without the fear of judgment
- Churches hosting support groups like AA, Al-Anon, Narcotic Anonymous, and Alateen
- Addiction issues discussed in small group settings such as bible studies, Sunday school, and youth groups

- Recognition of individuals engaged in ministries that help break the cycle of addiction
- Celebration of recovery
- Database of United Methodists that lead substance abuse and related violence ministries or field professionals (<http://www.umspсарv.org/>)

The Church can make a difference and we are called to do so. The prevalence of drug addiction in the North Georgia area is high, given this further expansion and marketing of the SPSARV Program and Faith Partners ministry would be beneficial. Early evidence from local congregations like Snellville UMC suggests that uptake of ministries such as this would be great if local churches were more aware of and continually encouraged to embrace them. My prayer is God would use each of us to confront the hard issues. Amen!!

Hatred

The church is composed of varied groups of people from a multitude of diverse groups of people from just as many backgrounds. It is easy for such diversity to create a rift in the church, as was the case in Corinth. But despite the differences, all believers have one thing in common—their faith in Christ. In this single truth, the church finds unity.

In Ephesians Paul says, “There is one Body” (The Bible, Ephesians 4:4, NIV). Unity does not just happen, we have to work at it. Difference can lead to division or it can lead to a strengthening of the Body of Christ; remembering what united us, one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God!

Definition of Hatred

Hatred is a very strong word. Merriam-Webster (2001) defines hatred as “prejudiced hostility or animosity” (p. 239). The writers continue by defining “hate” under two headings; first, as a noun, (1) “an intense hostility and aversion, (2) an object of hatred”; second, as a verb, “hates, hated, hating: (1) to express or feel extreme enmity, (2) to find distasteful; syn.: detest, abhor, abominate, loathe” (p. 239).

Personal Reflection

All of these definitions fit into a discussion that I had with a combat veteran friend who experienced hatred firsthand. He was a corpsman who served with the Marines in the Vietnam Conflict in the northern region of Southern Vietnam from 1966-1967. He was part of a combined action company, a special operations unit near the demilitarized zone (DMZ). During his tours in-country, he was doing fine until a 10-year old orphaned Vietnamese girl befriended him. She became his interpreter for the locals and she helped him with the medical needs of the local

people. It was when she noticed what the North Vietnamese people were planning and relayed that information to him that she put her life in danger. She told the corpsman not to come to the front gate and she was the one who ended up being killed the next day. She died in the corpsman's arms and it was then that he began to hate.

It was like a switch had been flipped in his head when the young girl had died. The corpsman's mind went from the God fearing man that he was trained to be from a young boy to a raged filled man who wanted revenge for the loss of a dear friend; the young girl who saved his life—Co Wa. To this day he questions his actions and why she placed her life in such danger. But he still maintains his hatred for the Vietnamese people.

Having spent time in the military myself, the United States Air Force (1974-1979 and 1982-1988), and having had my own traumatic events happen to me, I understand where the corpsman is coming from when it comes to hatred. I suffer from military sexual trauma (MST) post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Yes, I was raped and beaten more times than I care to say while I was in the USAF. But I never developed a hatred of men. Why was I different from the corpsman? I believe it was because of my deep relationship with God and Christ. My hatred was not an outward hatred; it was a hatred aimed inward. It was not until some friends of mine reminded me of who I was before the rapes and beatings! They reminded me that I was a child of God and that I reflected all the qualities of God; I was created in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26). Even though I am not God, I can reflect His character in my love, patience, forgiveness, kindness, and faithfulness (Genesis 1:26, NIV, Parallel). I did not have to shoulder the hatred for those who had betrayed me in my past.

Hatred can overpower the best of people if they are not watchful. I thought I was a very loving person who would never hate anyone or anything; well, so I thought. Going back to when

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I was raped and beaten, I found a pattern of men whom were involved in my life; alcoholics. Initially, they would be nice to me until after we were married. Then they would change; the drinking would take over and the abuse would start.

I vowed that I would keep my wedding vows and stay married to the man no matter what was happening to me because we had two sons. I was being tossed around like a rag doll, but what I was interpreting from the Bible was to stay married. It was during this time that I was developing a deep hatred for my husband. I was finding ways to avoid him; asking for extra shifts at work, working out at the local gym, taking my oldest son, then around one year old, to the local park. I also found out that I could not trust my husband with my children as well. Another reason to hate my husband.

Eventually, we did end up divorced. But the damage was done and I had to learn how to forgive not only my ex-husband, but also myself for allowing myself to hate. This pattern repeated itself again with another abusive man in the USAF. And again, I allowed myself to fall into the trap of hatred. It is such an easy trap to fall into, yet a difficult one to get out of once you have fallen into the hole. Not only must you forgive the person whom you hate, but you must forgive yourself.

These, along with any number of other issues come into our churches every day. Members of our congregations bring their preconceived ideas or notions of who should be members, what jobs those members should perform, or whether or not a person is qualified to perform a specific job based on their own personal opinion; not the actual qualifications or spiritual gifts of the individual. It is when opposing views of a particular issue arise that conflict rears its ugly head in our churches; (i.e., gay and lesbian membership, gay and lesbian marriage, racial hatred, and even discrimination against the disabled and more).

The Purpose of Conflict

God loves us so much that He gave us conflict for a reason. In 1 Corinthians 11:19 Paul writes, “No doubt there has to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval” (The Bible, NIV). He is making it clear to the people that there will be differences among the people in the church, which is normal in any church. It is when people develop into “self-willed divisions” and become disruptive to the Body of Christ that the problems arise. The result of any division is in highlighting those who are genuine believers.

No matter what our troubles may be, we must focus on what is unseen versus what is seen; as it is written in 2 Corinthians 4: 17-18, For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” Our troubles, big or small, should not diminish our faith or disillusion us. We should realize that there is a purpose in our suffering: (1) to remind us of Christ’s suffering for us; (2) to keep us from pride; (3) to cause us to look beyond this brief life; (4) to prove our faith to others; and (5) to give God the opportunity to demonstrate his power (2 Corinthians 4: 17-18, Parallel, NIV).

Paul also tells us that we have the privilege of suffering. In Philippians 1: 29-30, “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have” (The Bible, NIV). Here Paul considers it a privilege to suffer for Christ. Many of us, in this day and age do not consider it a privilege to suffer. Yet when we suffer, if we remain faithful in our representation of Christ, our demonstration of the Christ-like qualities to those around us, it will affect everyone we come in contact with and ourselves for the good (The Bible, Acts 5:41, NIV).

Suffering has additional benefits: (1) it takes our eyes off of earthly comforts; (2) it weeds out superficial believers; (3) it strengthens the faith of those who endure; (4) it serves as an example to others who may follow us. God rewards those who suffer for their faith. It doesn't mean that we have done something wrong; exactly the opposite—it verifies that we have been faithful to God and His Word.

Paul wants Christians to see suffering in the name of the Lord as badge of courage. If we are not suffering, we should not forget those who are suffering around us. If we have a pantry full of food, share your food. If you have the ability to help someone who is unable to help themselves through the “extra helping hands” in a specific governmental agency, then work your magic for justice and mercy. If you're in a position financially to help someone with a grocery bill or utility or even rent payment, then give generously. When life is comfortable, willingly take a share of someone else's pain, and so tell the world that the gospel is true.

God's View of Hatred

God has had to deal with hatred from the very beginning of time. After Adam and Eve bore their sons, Cain and Abel, hatred began when Cain slew Abel. As it states in Genesis 4: 1-16, “Abel kept flocks and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast” (The Bible, NIV). No reason was ever given on why God rejected Cain's sacrifice. It could have been Cain's attitude, or that the offering was not up to God's standards. According to Proverbs 21:27, “The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable—how much more so when brought with evil intent!” (The Bible, NIV). When we give to God, our offerings at church, and to others, we should do so

with a joyful heart. We should not worry about how much we are giving, because it is all God's in the first place. Rather, we should give to God our best in time, money, possessions, and talents.

Cain should have thought about loving his brother. For it is written in Leviticus 19: 17 "Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt" (The Bible, NIV).

John Wesley's View of Hatred

As the Methodist church grew in America so did its problems. One of these problems concerned slavery which was prominent in the southern colonies and banned in the northern colonies. "John Wesley was an ardent opponent of slavery. Many of the leaders of early American Methodism shared his hatred for this form of human bondage. The United Brethren in Christ took a strong stand against slavery, as church members could not sell a slave, and by 1837 ruled that slave owners could not continue as members. As the nineteenth century progressed, it became apparent that tensions were deepening in Methodism over the issue of slavery (The Book of Discipline, 2008, p 14).

The question of slavery would split the church. "Delegates from the southern states met in Louisville, Kentucky, in May 1845, to organize their new church. Their first General Conference was held the following year in Petersburg, Virginia, where a Discipline and hymnbook were adopted. Bitterness between northern and southern Methodists intensified in the years leading to Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860 and then through the carnage of the Civil War. Each church claimed divine sanction for its region and prayed fervently for God's will to be accomplished in victory for its side (The Book of Discipline, 2008, p.14).

The Civil War dealt an extremely harsh blow to The Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The membership fell by two-thirds its pre-war strength. Many of the churches were in ruins or were gravely damaged. A number of its clergy had been killed or wounded in the conflict. Its educational, publishing, and missionary programs had been temporarily disrupted. Yet there was a new vitality among the southern Methodists that extended over the next fifty years with its membership growing fourfold to more than two million (The Book of Discipline, 2008, p. 15).

Since the end of the Civil War, the African American membership of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, had declined. In 1870 its General Conference voted to transfer all of its remaining African American constituency to a new church. The Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (now called The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church) was the product of this decision (The Book of Discipline, 2008, p. 15).

At the same time, Alejo Hernandez became the first ordained Hispanic preacher in Methodism, although Benigno Cardenas had preached the Methodist message in Spanish in Santa Fe, New Mexico, as early as 1853 (The Book of Discipline, 2008, p. 15). The spread of Methodism continued across America as the country continued to expand its borders.

As World War I approached, there was much sympathy in the churches for negotiation and arbitration versus armed conflict. Many of the church's members openly professed pacifism. However, when the United States entered into WWI in 1917, the idea of pacifism disappeared. Other American churches were experiencing the same national loyalties (The Book of Discipline, 2008, p. 17).

UMC Position on Hatred

The Book of Discipline (2008), states that "Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience,

and confirmed by reason” (p. 77). Living the Christian faith means demonstrating the qualities of God to those around you; living the Word. It is through demonstration that people around you change and healing begins.

The issues that bring about conflict in our churches and ultimate hatred usually end up in the Judicial Counsel. It is the highest judicial body in The United Methodist Church (The Book of Discipline, 2008, ¶ 2601). Currently the Judicial Counsel is deciding the fate of a clergywoman who was recently came out to the public about her sexuality. The Book of Discipline provides the guidance that we need for the Church and for the Body of Christ. The Bible also provides some very clear guidance about the many issues that the Church faces every day.

Recommendations

When the local church faces a conflict, there should be someone within the church trained to help it handle the conflict. The individual or individuals should have been trained at a conference level course, Conflict Resolution. The idea behind this course is a Biblical and theological foundation that would support conflict resolution and provide practical measures and resources for Laity and Clergy. This course is currently offered under Parrish Life by Pastor Sondra R. Jones of Buford First UMC. The contact information is provided at the North Georgia Conference website (<http://www.ngumc.org>).

Another conference level course that may be helpful is, “So What’s Our Position?” The idea behind this course is that the participants will have an opportunity to discuss and come to a better appreciation of the Methodist Church’s theological positions on the social issues of the day (<http://www.ngumc.org>). Currently, this course is offered by Pastor Lavell Sanders of Bethel UMC, Stockbridge.

With social issues constantly changing, the local churches need to look to the Bible and The Book of Discipline, 2008, for guidance. Both books provide very wise guidance and wisdom from our elders in regard to most issues that are facing the church today and could possibly face in the future. The key that we need to remember is the Golden Rule that Jesus taught us all, “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (The Bible, Luke 6: 31, NIV).

As social issues change, workshops and/or courses need to change with them. Rather than offering the workshops on an “as needed basis,” it would be better to ensure that each church has at least two people trained for conflict resolution and any other courses that would benefit the Body of Christ in dealing with the enormity of social issues that are arising in our current times.

What I needed to learn is to forgive, not only myself but also the individuals who caused harm to me. It took numerous efforts on my part to forgive the individuals, but I found it more difficult to forgive myself because I still felt “dirty.” It wasn’t until a conversation with a friend of mine who told me that, “I was still as pure as the day before the first attack.” I cried. The shame was gone. I was able to forgive myself after all these years.

Pastor Chip Wilson, in his December 5, 2010, sermon, entitled, “When the Messiah comes home: There will be peace,” reinforced the act of forgiveness and laying it all at the altar, at the feet of Christ. In Isaiah 11 it states that “God will judge with righteousness and justice” (NIV). We need to trust God in His judgment. We need to turn to Him in our times of trouble and lay our problems at His feet. We also need to turn toward each other and offer a helping hand. It is through our turning toward each other, not away, that we truly demonstrate what God wants us to do for each other---love one another. Jasper UMC demonstrates this through their Stephen Ministry. When a member calls out with a need, a Stephen Minister, who is trained, is sent out to help the individual/family until the need is met.

Even as Stephen was being stoned to death, he prayed "Lord Jesus receive my spirit" and he fell to his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:51-60, NIV). When he had said this, he fell asleep. Stephen not only forgave those who were stoning him, but also asked the Lord to forgive them as well.

Jesus taught his disciples a simple, yet beautiful prayer to pray daily--The Lord's Prayer. Within this prayer is the plea for forgiveness of our debts."Forgive our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (The Bible, Matthew 6: 12). In other words, we should love one another no matter what the other person has done to us. And love is reflected in love.

We also need also need to remember that God has promised to be with us in good times and in our times of trouble. Psalms 111:5 reminds us that God will keep His covenant forever, "He provides food for those who fear him; He remembers his covenant forever" (NIV). As long as God knows the future, and provides for us in accordance with His agenda we can have immeasurable hope. This does not mean that we will not be spared the pain or hardship; it just means that God will see us through it to a triumphant end.

"God never forget his people. He wants to see them have a new beginning with a new purpose as with the people of Judah" (The Bible, Jeremiah 29: 12-14, NIV). Just because we are in a difficult place in life, we need to remember that God is always with us, omnipresent, and He can be sought out for help at anytime of the day or night.

I have found peace through my reliance on God. Laying my traumas from my time in the Air Force at the feet of Christ helped me tremendously. Knowing that God would take my traumas from me and heal me was a big relief in my life. I know that my life may not be smooth the rest of my life, but knowing God is there for me to guide me through the rough spots helps me understand why I am going through the particular situation.

Comment [16]:
Ashleigh May 5/5/11 9:40 AM
Version? NIV?

Isaiah 43:5 reminds me, "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand"
(The Bible, NIV)

Bereavement

The Problem (1)

The year 2004 started out to be a quiet one. Little did I know that my life was about to change drastically very shortly. At the end of January we received word that my Mother-in-law was to have surgery for possible colon cancer. So my husband and I left on a Sunday night to go down for what we thought was going to be routine surgery. However, several surgeries and thirty days later we had to make a decision to take her off the ventilator. Murphy's Law had taken place in that everything that could and did go wrong for a minor surgery. She passed away in March. My husband had a very hard time dealing with the death of his mother. He had emotional problems from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) stemming from his service during the Viet Nam days when he worked in the mortuary. Then in June my boss was admitted to Rehab for a chemical addiction. He was out of the office for 3 months. In August my husband was diagnosed with colon cancer. After surgery, which was on our granddaughter's birthday; and aggressive chemo, he passed away on our son's anniversary in November. During all this time I have been attending church. I was a part of the UMW, the choir, and Sunday school. I also attended as many other church functions as I could. In the days and weeks to follow unfolded as this:

I am so tired after having worked two jobs as I walk into my house. The quiet is deafening and the loneliness sets in once again. I begin to cry and then I cry out to God. I don't think that I can face another lonely night. It has been a short while since my husband passed away and I feel like I have been deserted by everyone. My pastor has not called, neither has my Sunday School teacher nor my choir director and quite frankly no one in my whole church has called to check on me. I do feel rejected by a church that I have been a member for over two years. I was very active in Sunday school, UMW, and member of the choir. Yet, no one bothered

to call. It would have been nice for someone to have left a message on the answering machine. The church is small and the people are not exactly strangers as I have been their dental hygienist for more than 20 years. These were the hardest times of my life. I would be too tired to cook and longed for someone to bring me a bowl of soup, a salad or anything I did not have to think about doing. Except for my son and his family who live 25 miles away, my nearest relative lives 220 miles away. It seemed that every person I had known had abandoned me. I was even beginning to wonder where God was and why He, too, had left me out in the cold to fend for myself. I spent many long hours in my prayer closet trying to find answers to the questions I was having. I thought that the church family was to nurture the members. I had noticed they were very nurturing to others in the church. After a year I even left the church. I was gone for over a year and received no phone calls from anyone, including the pastor, to find out why I was not attending any more.

The Problem (2)

I was in the throes of writing my dissertation. For months, I have poured my heart and soul into the final document of my graduate career. By January 2008, I was in the home stretch, working exhausting 15-16 hours days to ensure that everything would be complete and submitted to my committee in time for my defense which was scheduled for early March, nothing else at that time seemed to matter. So imagine my startle when on January 16, 2008 my phone rang with news that my aunt was in considerable distress. After a brief hospital stint she had entered into a coma and her vital organs were beginning to fail. All plausible avenues to medical intervention had been exhausted. She had successfully completed treatment for breast cancer in 2005, only to have it return and spread quite aggressively in early 2007. We were all aware that her time with us was limited, and the painful chore of watching her health decline precipitously in less than

one year. I knew based on phone conversations with her that she was nearing the end of her painful battle. Her breath was laborious, phone conversations became shorter and less frequent and by December 2007, they had ceased altogether as she was too weak and in too much pain engage in even short conversations. Certainly I realized that this would be an end to her suffering and beginning to her transition to life eternal, for to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8), something that she had definitely earned based on the life that she lived and grace, dignity and acceptance that she displayed throughout her battle with cancer. When we arrived in Ohio, we made our first stop at the hospital where my aunt was located. Soon after got there the decision was made to remove my aunt from the ventilator. We all stood at her bedside and engaged in prayer and sang her favorite hymn in those final moments. Having never experienced anyone's transition firsthand, I was not sure of exactly what to expect. Being a person of faith I assumed that I would personally feel a sense of peace and relief with her passing, instead I was overcome by anger and disbelief. For months, since her final diagnosis, we had all held out hope and prayed in earnest for her healing, but it never came. Even in those final moments, when it was clear that the end of her earthly life was imminent it seemed that that God never showed up. Where was he? We prayed for her transition, His guidance and comfort. We sang hymns of hope and consoling...but nothing. Having a sense of his presence at that moment of transition would have been of reassuring, but the only thing that permeated the room was a deafening silence that was compounded by my anger.

UMC Position on Bereavement

At some point in life most individuals will experience the pain associated with the loss of a loved one. In fact, according to a study published by the Lewis Center for Church Leadership (www.churchleadership.com), in the UMC, the rate of death among those in the

United States who are members of the UMC death rates are one-third higher than the national average. This suggests to some extent, that there are a substantial number of individuals who are members of the UMC who are left to experience the process of grief.

Key documents of the UMC provide guidance regarding care for those who are bereaved. The Social Principles of the UMC indicate that “even when one accepts the inevitability of death, the church and society must continue to provide faithful care, including pain relief, companionship, support, and spiritual nurture for the dying person in the hard work of preparing for death....Faithful care does not end at death but continues during bereavement as we care for grieving families (The Book of Discipline, 2008, ¶161).

During this period of time, there are a number of ways in which those who have experienced the loss of a loved one are supported through their journey through grief. Pastoral counseling after the death is experienced and sometimes leading up to the transition is a common experience. During this time pastors, some of whom have received extensive training in mental health as well as areas of theology and ministry, pray with and counsel individuals through the process of grief as instructed by the Book of Discipline (2008, ¶ 340). Often too in the days immediately following a loss, members of the congregation will come together to support the bereaved family. This may come in the form of meal preparation, phone calls, visitation/fellowship, or through other means.

Additional guidance that may also apply to bereaved individuals is also given. According to the 2008 Book of Discipline (¶ 228) “It shall be the duty of the pastor and of the members of the church council by regular visitation, care, and spiritual oversight to provide necessary activities and opportunities for spiritual growth.....if a member is regularly absent from the worship of the church without valid reason, the pastor and the membership secretary shall report

that member's name to the church council, which shall do all in its power to reenlist the member in the active fellowship of the church. ~~It shall visit the member and make clear that...since the member is not attending the church where enrolled, the member is requested to do one of four things~~". As suggested by the aforementioned testimonies, support such as this may be especially important for bereaved individuals, but often it does not outlast the needs of those who have experienced the loss. Grief ministry in the church often ends less than two weeks after the family experiences the loss of a loved one, leaving those who are bereaved feeling alone and isolated and in some instances unable to seek additional support.

Grieving is a highly individualized experience that for some may take weeks while for others the process may be experienced over months or even longer. As Rev. Dr. Reed an ordained UMC elder writes, "herein lies one of the reasons grief care is often a neglected ministry"

(<http://www.gbod.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=nhLRJ2PMKsG&b=5474653&ct=291794>

) –the "Faithful care" that "continues during bereavement...for grieving families" (The Book of Discipline, 2008, ¶161. II) is missing. This 'neglect' may not be intentional--pastors themselves have high demands in all areas of the church and lay persons may not be fully equipped to handle the intricacies or recognize the delicate nature of grief ministries. We offer the following recommendations to aid members of the local church, clergy and laity to minister to those who are bereaved.

Recommendations

In addition to current ways through which the church currently ministers to those who are bereaved, there are additional methods through which churches can provide better support to individuals experiencing loss.

1. Special Services during the Advent Season. In 2002, Holy Covenant Church in Carrollton, Texas held its first “Longest Night” Service on Christmas Eve which was specifically organized for those who had experienced the loss of a loved one. Leaning on the overarching meaning behind this period of the liturgical calendar it allows individuals to express their grief, but also focuses on hope.
<http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=IwL4KnN1LtH&b=1852211&ct=7784469>)
2. Grief Support Groups. Some churches provide grief support groups that are facilitated by the church’s pastor or a third party. Through these sessions members of the congregation learn more about the process and journey through grief and way to cope through biblical context.
3. Themed Support Groups. Themed support groups related to grief may be beneficial to those who are bereaved, especially those who have experienced a tragic loss. Vinings United Methodist Church in the North Georgia Conference has a homicide support group for those who have lost loved ones to violent deaths. Support groups such as these allow individuals to go beyond traditional support groups and reach out to and connect with others who have experience similar types of loss.
<http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=6&mid=2693>)
4. Outside Resources. Clergy should be aware of resources in their respective communities that may be of benefit to bereaved individuals. This may include mental health services and other methods of support not directly available in the local church. Additional resources that allow individuals who may not be ready for support group settings to express their grief should also be made available. These may include

electronic resources. For example the North Carolina Conference of the UMC provides resources on their website which include an extensive list of spiritually based books, videos, and other media for bereaved individuals (<http://nccumc.org/mediacenter/subject-guides/subject-guide-on-grief-loss/>).

5. Pre-Bereavement Support. In instances when life's transition is suspected, clergy should provide support and counseling not only for those whose transition is pending, but pastoral counseling targeted to family members.
6. Congregational support. Members of the congregation should provide extended support to bereaved members. This may include routine phone calls and visits after funeral and memorial services. Local churches should also consider offering training to congregational support ministry team that may include basic information on the grieving process and the biblical context through which they may comfort fellow members. One way to accomplish this may be through Stephen Ministries. Through this ministry, lay persons are provided with the training and resources to aid in one on one congregational care to the bereaved, ill, and other individuals experiencing challenges in life. This ministry has been adopted at UMC churches in the North Georgia Conference including Roswell UMC (<http://www.rumc.com/page.aspx?id=79281>) and provides opportunities for growth for lay persons and releases time in the schedule of clergy.