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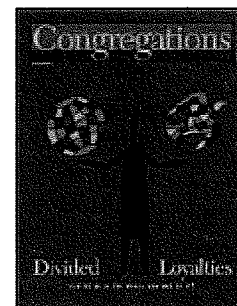
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CONGREGATIONS

Fall 2003

Can Congregations Talk about War?

The topic of the week for the congregation's popular adult forum was Jonah (post-whale). At the worship service, the minister departed from the appointed lectionary text to follow up with a sermon on God's faithfulness among all kinds of people, often transcending our limited perspective. Her children's sermon also fit the theme: the kids got to talk about grumpiness and how silly it can be in light of God's purposes. The prayers of the people covered the usual range, from hospitalized members to those (unnamed) who "struggle today with fractured relationships and broken lives." The prayers concluded with a fervent petition for God's presence with U.S. troops in a faraway land, as well as with their anxious families stateside. The verbal bulletin board of announcements at the end of the service reminded the flock of upcoming meetings, a denominational gathering, and the youth car wash.



Members and a few visitors schmoozed at coffee hour, greeting each other warmly and exchanging tidbits of personal news. A few days later, the national government of these citizens would attack the land of ancient Nineveh. On the Sunday-morning talk shows that day, the grounds for attacking Iraq were debated, but among this gathered community of Christ, the topic did not come up.

Silenced Congregations

My hunch is that this Protestant church was not so very different that week from many other congregations. While discussions in the public forum were lively, those who identify themselves as the people of God did not, for the most part, engage the topic—even among themselves. Seldom was a "faith perspective" heard as the country prepared for a war that most nations of the global community opposed. Few communities of faith waded into the topic, beyond extending support for troops and pastoral support for their families. What was going on? Perhaps we felt we would appear unpatriotic by questioning the war effort or, worse, unsupportive of the thousands of Americans who would risk their lives in armed conflict. Or we believed that we did not have sufficient information or expertise to offer a considered opinion. Maybe we thought that entering public dialogue "from a faith perspective" sounded naïve or fundamentalist. Such assumptions may have silenced us from talking even among ourselves.

Of course the discomfort was even more complicated for clergy. Speaking about public issues—particularly an imminent war—is a homiletical minefield. The stakes are high. Preachers risk alienating individuals or whole chunks of the congregation if they bring a critical perspective to a public issue. Besides being subject to the conversation inhibitors cited above, those in the pulpit are particularly sensitive to the appearance of a God-on-our-side theology or arrogant eisegesis. Outright advocacy is seldom heard unless the prophet is preaching to the proverbial choir of kindred spirits. In the crassest sense, the bottom line can be—well, the bottom line. That is, disgruntled members, like disgruntled stockholders, can withdraw their investment if they disapprove of the leadership. The minister, therefore, carries an additional layer of professional vulnerability.

However, the real bottom line is finally not economic. The loss to those who avoid engaging in difficult conversation is not financial but more profound:

- The people of God fail to draw on the resource of their faith to understand complex issues.
- The public witness to God's justice and mercy is not heard as decisions are made determining the fate of millions and the course of history.

What does the sovereignty of God mean if the voice of the church has been silenced not by coercion but by the church's own inclination to muffle itself?

The cultural reasons that the faith perspective is not heard nearly enough in public dialogue—not to mention the dearth of discussions of public issues among people of faith—are many and complex. But let us not get hung up on simply analyzing this dynamic. As Martin Luther King, Jr., reminded us, analysis can be paralyzing. That is, we can become so fascinated by trying to understand ourselves that no time, energy, or impetus remains for change.

Framing the Dialogue

Let's assume that your congregation is similar to the one described above and that you would like it to become, instead, a community in which difficult conversations are not merely tolerated but encouraged. Imagine gathered people of God who take seriously their role as public citizens and want to explore what their faith in Jesus (or Yahweh or Allah) brings to the policy decisions made on our behalf. What qualities might mark a congregation that explores issues, looks for ways that faith commitments inform public deliberation, and honors the diversity of perspectives? More critical is this question: How can we become that kind of congregation?

Although the war in Iraq was proclaimed to have ended in May, the situation is still messy. "Low-intensity warfare" continues, with soldiers on both sides and Iraqi civilians dying. How then can we frame dialogue not so much to define a "just war" as to wrestle critically with the meaning of a "just peace"? The issues at stake are weighty and complicated, yet profoundly theological. What does it mean for a state to be sovereign? Who should define the restructuring of a nation, and why? What is a just use of national and global resources in assisting Iraq to recover economically, reorganize politically, and heal as a society? To whom are we in our nation accountable? To the people of Iraq? To our international allies? To the poor within our own borders? To God?

Making Use of Resources

Americans tend to shy away from issues if they feel overwhelmed by complexity. (Perhaps our biggest leap of faith is "leaving it to the experts.") People of faith are no different. The first step in cultivating rich dialogue within a congregation is to encourage people to learn as much about the issue as possible. Make resources like newspapers, books, Web sites, and magazine or journal articles accessible; ensure that references to these sources are a natural occurrence in all aspects of congregational programming, from sermons to youth meetings to coffee hour. One does not need a graduate degree to read political journals or to watch serious news commentary. It is not only 20- and 30-somethings who can surf the Web for information. Many denominations have continued to devote large portions of their own Web sites to global issues, especially since 9/11.

Of course, raising the knowledge level of a congregation can and should be accomplished in more structured ways. Bringing in speakers for a Lenten series, adult forums, or special services can be enlightening. Often, however, planners fail to provide for stimulating dialogue. Not wanting to "offend" members, planning committees may bring in several "experts" representing a variety of viewpoints. The assumption is that after hearing "all sides" of an issue, individuals can then follow the leading of their own consciences.

This notion is not entirely misguided—we do need to explore all positions in a debate and to honor the various conclusions members reach. But absent in this approach is an opportunity for members to engage the issue with each other. Such an encounter requires a level of trust in the congregation, that one will not be judged as being too conservative or too liberal, ill-informed, heretical, unpatriotic, or worse. Listening to experts can be intellectually stimulating, but ultimately disempowering. People of faith need a context in which to explore divergent perspectives, try on new ideas, and ask the often-troubling questions posed by our faith without the threat of being judged or silenced. If we cannot find this sort of trust among our sisters and brothers in the faith, where then can we find it?

A Trusting Place to Disagree

Experiencing a safe place to engage in robust, if difficult, dialogue builds other types of trust—in ourselves and in God. If we listen only to experts, a kind of powerlessness sets in. We stop trusting our own instincts and voices. "Who am I to speak to this issue? What could I possibly contribute to this discussion? Better to sit and listen."

A trusting environment begets trust in ourselves. Yet we risk hearing a cacophony of newfound voices weighing in on issues. We could disagree with each other—out loud! Conflict is not a bad thing, we know in our heads; yet somehow we spend much energy avoiding it in the church. Yet imagine such a conflict. What is the worst thing that could happen? Such pre-thinking often diffuses the fear. But it also gives us a chance to plan strategically for a variety of scenarios.

A Witness to God

More important is to imagine the best outcomes—that people of faith will wrestle with issues, asking where God can be found in this dilemma; that they will dust off the Bible and try hard to listen to its wisdom. Disagreement is to be expected, but so is increased respect for each other. If the legacy of Pentecost means anything to us today, it is that somehow, out of our differences, the Spirit can create a unity that passes understanding. Finally, although we may not speak with the same accent, a powerful language binds us.

And to what end—so that we may merely appear "drunk" as at the first Pentecost, or look strange within our own culture? The ultimate expression is a witness to God—a God who desires peace and justice among all people. As our nation engages in wars and rumors of other wars that do not clearly fit neat categories of good versus evil, such a witness belongs not just in our assemblies but also in the public forum. To proclaim publicly and seriously God's love for all people—in Baghdad and New York, Palestine and Israel, Monrovia and Monmouth, New Jersey—will be to change the terms of the dialogue.

First we must learn to engage in difficult conversations among ourselves, so that we can, with integrity, discern what God intends for all people.

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