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COLIN PATTERSON

Dealing With Conflict in the Church of England

Colin Patterson builds on his discussion of conflict in the NT in the last issue to address conflict at various levels within the Church of England. He sets current patterns of dealing with conflict in the wider cultural context of Western society, then drawing on other cultures, argues for a more intuitive and subjective ('right-brain') and a less logical and verbal ('left-brain') approach in an attempt to reform the Church of England.

Introduction

Could the Church of England do better at handling conflict? Yes, according to Bishop Michael Turnbull, who spearheaded the reshaping of its administrative structures in the 1990s. As noted in my article in the previous issue of *Anvil*,¹ he has said that we in the Church of England still need to get beyond 'mere synthesis, uneasy partnerships and uncomfortable compromises.'² I agree, but I think he has actually understated the problem.

I write at a time when the Church of England has suffered months of very public conflict. It is tempting to focus on that alone. But I believe that the issue needs to be set in a larger context. It seems to me that there is a crisis in the whole of western society about how to handle conflict. Grappling with the complexities of a pluralist culture, we are no longer sure we know what to do – with Iraq, with terrorists, or even with noisy neighbours. Radical answers are needed, and my approach is based on the following wide-ranging thesis:

(1) Western culture has for a long time over-emphasised the importance of rational, scientific thinking – an outlook that has produced a certain style of education and government. (Here I follow Lesslie Newbigin and the 'gospel and culture' movement.)

(2) Such a culture has characteristic ways of dealing with conflict, notable for being dominated by 'left-brain' thinking. (Here I draw on my own experience as a mediator.)

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- 1 Colin Patterson, 'Dealing With Conflict in the New Testament', *Anvil* 20 (2003), pp 207ff.
 - 2 Michael Turnbull, *Managing the Reshaping of the Church of England*,

Magdalene College Occasional Paper No. 24, Cambridge, 2000. The text has also been published at www.durham.anglican.org/reference/sermons/lect-managing-cofe.htm.

(3) These patterns of behaviour are, by and large, accepted uncritically by Christians in the Church of England. (I base this on my contact with a wide range of Anglicans in my work as a diocesan training officer.)

(4) Western Christians have something to learn from the constructive responses to conflict employed in other cultures. (The examples I present are the fruits of my own research.)

(5) The Church of England would be able to deal with conflict in a more biblical way if it adopted a more 'right-brain' approach.

The Church of England Way

It is never easy to take a step back and examine one's own culture. But that is where we in the Church of England must begin. At the risk of over-simplification, I suggest that there is something like a Church of England Way to 'do conflict'.

In any large group of people, conflict is dealt with at two levels: formal and informal. Informally, certain ways of doing things are part of the prevailing culture, yet nowhere are they officially prescribed. Formally, and working in parallel, are structures of authority and decision-making. (In the case of the Church of England, of course, many of those are prescribed in the law of the land.) It will be important as we go along to recognise how the informal and the formal work together – or fail to do so – at various levels within a national church.

Interpersonal Conflict

First let us examine conflict at a *person-to-person level*, where it is mostly dealt with in an informal way. If someone from your church does something that upsets you, what do you do? If you are a typical Anglican, you first seethe in silence. Then if the problem continues, you grumble to your friends. You dread possible confrontation so you start to avoid the offender. If things still get worse, you complain to the vicar or churchwarden and ask them to do something. If all else fails, you move to a different church. In short, the one who causes you offence is usually the last person you will talk to about it. This habit of avoiding confrontation is so ingrained that if a preacher draws attention to it when expounding Matt. 18:15-17, the congregation will smile but be quite reluctant to see it as a serious problem that needs addressing.

Perhaps this is just typically British, along with stiff upper lips. However, I wonder whether things are changing. A Christian teenager recently commented to me that amongst people of his generation it is perfectly normal to confront someone who has caused offence.

Church Congregations

At a *congregational level* things are more complex, but once again informal patterns are very significant. A common one is to bow to the wishes of the person/group that has achieved dominance – another case of reluctance to engage in confrontation. There are congregations in which it simply would not occur to most people to challenge X – where X might be the vicar, a certain churchwarden, the organist, the members of a certain family, or a Parochial Church Council (PCC)

whose membership has been the same for years. Whether for good reasons (e.g. commanding widespread respect) or for bad ones (e.g. always shouting loudest), X is firmly in charge. Or conflict may be suppressed by the force of a dominant *ethos*. That is to say, there is one way of doing things and the congregation keeps itself culturally monochrome by being unwelcoming to strangers. Newcomers either accept the way things are or, when they suggest new ideas, they are strongly resisted.

In other congregations there is no strong lid on the pressure cooker. At their best, they have effective ways of dealing with disputes as they arise. For example, when there is a territorial spat between two groups of people, the vicar arbitrates. He or she is a widely-respected figure, so the congregation responds by expecting the vicar to give a ruling and hoping that those in the disappointed party will accept it. The vicar has taken due counsel with others, knows best, or at least should be supported, having made a difficult decision. Matters come to a peaceful conclusion, especially if the issue was not highly contentious in the first place. In other cases, the PCC is a key player, acting as a forum for everybody's views to be heard and for wise, prayerful decisions to be made.

Yet in situations where conflict begins to escalate, PCCs often seem to make things worse. The vicar can find herself trying to wear two hats at once: as chair of the PCC, she tries to ensure a fair hearing to everyone but as pastor she is pushing strongly for a particular outcome. In fact, it is often the case that a vicar simply cannot mediate in a serious congregational conflict because she is personally caught up in the whole business. Maybe something she wants to do has spawned a pro and an anti group; perhaps the vicar is thought to be consistently siding with one group of people against another. In some cases, a congregation is unhappy with the whole way the church is being led, but that is rarely actually broached in PCC meetings; the vicar just feels persistently obstructed. Sadly, such unhappiness can arise simply because of faithfully trying to do what the Church of England demands. No official forum exists for thrashing out confusion about the vicar's role when the parish discovers it must now share the vicar with another parish, or two... or seven. Clergy who are being crushed by an absurd weight of expectation feel they must just soldier on and do their best.

Whatever the reason, if a congregation is at odds with its vicar, the fact that canon law sets out clearly the powers of incumbents, wardens and PCCs does not help much. Some congregations lapse into glum or bitter resignation, waiting till the next change of vicar; others decide that the vicar is intolerable and seek intervention from an archdeacon or bishop. Once things have reached that stage, every player in the drama (bishop included) feels that there is not much that can be done. Whatever formal powers there are (and they are often not as great as some people suppose), they offer very blunt instruments for restoring peaceful relationships. The will to forgive went out of the window a long time ago.

Anglican Dioceses

At *diocesan level*, things are more complex still and the weight of formal apparatus is greater. Yet a diocese is not a corporate entity in the same way as a local church. It is because your local church matters to you that differences between you and

other members might lead to conflict. By contrast, I guess that most members of parish churches perceive the diocese as something 'out there', not something of which they are part. Consequently, if there is conflict in the diocese, it usually makes little impact on them; it is just antics 'They' are getting up to. Furthermore, I doubt that there are many dioceses where people are *queuing* to get a place on synods, boards and councils. Whatever those bodies do, it is perceived by most of the Anglicans in whose name they do it as nothing very important. Why spend an evening in a room full of people waiting to go home?

However, for those who do hold a diocesan responsibility, it can provide very lively opportunities for conflict. Diocesan committees bring together groups of people with greater cultural diversity than any member is likely to experience in his/her parish church. Now, there is no *a priori* reason why any of them should know or understand what is deeply precious to fellow committee members or what goes on in their churches, yet typical agendas will concentrate on simply getting business done, giving little attention to helping people get to know one another. This is a recipe for talking at cross purposes, for being unaware of, or unconcerned about, any anxiety or anger that one is evoking in others.

Putting it another way, the Church of England in committee mode promotes *debate* at the expense of *dialogue*. The difference is one of attitude. In debate, my first concern is to *speak*, articulating what I think so that my point of view will prevail; in dialogue, my first concern is to *listen* in order to understand what others are saying.³ That does not mean I weakly assume that any view is equally valid as long as it is sincerely held. Dialogue requires me to be strong. Even if my immediate impression of you is that you are wrong, and I think I may have to oppose you, I will make the effort to hear you carefully and respectfully, and affirm what we have in common. I will remain open to the Spirit, who may prompt me that this is not the moment to press my point.

If debate is preferred over dialogue, then (especially when there is to be a vote on a contentious issue) meetings have an adversarial ethos which encourages speakers to score points and to be concerned solely with winning an argument. However, not all diocesan meetings are adversarial in tone. In some, reports are given, questions are invited, and speakers are thanked, but nothing that could be considered contentious is ever actually put to a vote. Either no corporate opinion is sought in any way, or else the chairman simply says, 'We're happy with that, are we?' and moves on, blithely assuming that he has correctly gauged the mood of the group. Such meetings can generate huge amounts of frustration.

One hallmark of ineffective meetings is that all the real discussion takes place in the car park afterwards. No constructive confrontation occurs in the formal proceedings, either because it is not attempted or because it is actively prevented. Another hall mark is suspicion that all the real decisions are being made in informal meetings. A justified suspicion? Sometimes, perhaps, but in my opinion there is

3 Carolyn Schrock-Shenk (ed.), *Mediation & Facilitation Training Manual (4th edn.)*, Mennonite Conciliation Service, 2000, pp 206f, expands on these thoughts.

much more slip-up than conspiracy in the average diocese. Most dioceses nowadays are following a strategy of managed change but do not have the resources or structures to do it very effectively. Not surprisingly, ordinary church members are often left rather confused. They may feel that they don't understand, haven't been told about, or must conscientiously oppose the plans of their diocese.

Where confusion abounds, so does placation. People say, 'We're upset; we need such & such' and most of the Church of England's clergy, having a pastoral heart, try to respond positively and thereby avert conflict. But there is a price. They also reinforce a belief that the Church of England's job is to give people what they want. Notice the dilemma. The church tries to respond to massive social change and at the same time keep everybody happy. A better approach is to say, 'We'll try to support everybody in facing up to this situation.' However, support of that sort is painful to supporter and supported alike. It means pressing the question, 'What is the real cost of the demands you are making?' Some clergy would have to understand that they are wearing out willing lay workers; some laity would have to recognise that what they expect from their clergy is impossible.

The national church

At *national level*, pursuing a policy of managed change is harder still. In principle, the Archbishops' Council ensures that important issues are brought before General Synod, which commissions reports and debates them thoughtfully, so that the mind of the church is discerned in the way votes are cast. Then various Boards and Councils labour hard to take action. In practice, the adverse factors we noted at diocesan level still apply. Granted, it may be true that, because of reforms in the past decade, proposals passed by Synod are implemented more effectively nowadays. But it is usually what happens at an *informal* level that actually makes the running.

Putting it bluntly, national conflict in the Church of England cannot be simply *managed*. In fact, to a considerable extent, it is played out through the media, in ways beyond the church's control. Communicating via the media is generally a poor substitute for face-to-face dialogue, conducted in private. Consider what happens when you try to use the secular media to get across your point of view. You are at the mercy of the editor's scissors and you are often on the back foot. You are dealing with people who, on the whole, are more concerned with speed than depth, who relish controversy more than unity. This encourages an ethos in which those who shout loudest and are best organised have the most power.

One might hope that the Christian press would be a more helpful influence. But writing is a cold medium. It gives the writer no chance to communicate through tone of voice and body language, so that even a warm-hearted person may seem: clinical and detached in print. Actually, I cringe at quite a lot of the letters printed in church newspapers. Many of the writers come across to me as graceless and judgmental. They may not in fact be so, but that's the effect that a hundred-word salvo has.

Moulded by western culture

What does that all add up to? Institutionally, I would characterise the Church of England as a modern liberal democracy with the forces of post-modernity tearing at its roots. The formal structures work like this:

- Authority is exercised in a clearly-defined hierarchy (archbishops at the top and laity at the bottom)
- Executive action is conducted within an extremely detailed legal framework
- At many levels, power of decision is given to elected representatives
- The normal method of decision by representative bodies is to debate then vote

These are the basic trappings of modern western culture.⁴ They assume that in an industrialised society there will be change that can be managed by carefully applying established principles to present realities. Everything can be sorted out through rational discussion and chains of command. In this culture, the paradigm for dealing with conflict between two parties is that they engage in debate and try to reach an agreement. If necessary they refer matters to some objective authority, which in the worst cases will mean recourse to the law courts. There are, of course, other sorts of social interaction – sharing stories, making symbolic gestures, following rituals – and they have their place in the nursery, in church services, in informal fellowship, amongst arty sorts of people... but not in the tough world of making decisions and sorting out disputes.⁵

Notice some important consequences. First, in spite of the democratic ideal, a major source of conflict is the manipulative use of power. The Church of England, I suggest, mirrors wider society here: the *fait accompli* is alive and well; people can be highly obstructive by pressing the letter of the law and points of order; those with executive power can treat others as mere rubber stampers.

A second, very striking, consequence is that activities which affect hearts and minds take place largely *apart from* the decision-making structures. In modern western culture, our worship and nurture are kept in a separate compartment from government. Again, the Church of England largely follows suit. Furthermore, under the influence of the mass media, Church of England members acquire many of their aspirations and values apart from the church, and indeed apart from family, school, political parties, or any of the social units that have traditionally provided some sense of belonging.⁶

Modernity, then, has set its stamp on the Church of England. But now the structures of liberal democracy are being eroded by post-modern culture, and the Church of England is as vulnerable as British society more generally. Post-modernity does not value institutions, bureaucracy, deference or hierarchy,⁷ so the church's decision-making structures become objects of contempt. Furthermore, post-modern relationships are based on transitory networking,⁸ so the church finds commitment

4 See Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, SPCK, London 1986, chapter 2.

5 See Newbigin, *Foolishness*, pp 65-78 and Hugh Montefiore (ed.), *The Gospel and Contemporary Culture*, Mowbray, London 1992, pp 58-83.

6 See Montefiore (ed.), *Gospel and Contemporary Culture*, pp159-182.

7 See Harry Lee Poe, *Christian Witness in a Postmodern World*, Abingdon Press, Nashville 2001, p 79.

8 See Poe, *Christian Witness*, pp 30-35.

harder to come by – and communities with little commitment are too weak to cope with conflict.

Left and right brain in conflict

That is all fairly negative. However, there is an interesting twist to post-modern culture. Nowadays more and more print and screen time are being devoted to intuition, creativity, spirituality, communicating in pictures, emotional intelligence, and the like. I believe that these things appeal to something important about being human, and the Church of England ignores such a cultural change at its peril. In my work as a teacher and trainer of adults, I have observed that western education tends to prize left-brain thinking (logical, objective, verbal, chronological, analytic) more highly than right-brain thinking (intuitive, subjective, visual, spatial, synthetic).⁹ Indeed, one almost feels one has to apologise for using right-brain approaches amongst educated people.¹⁰ Yet there is self-evident value in working with stories, pictures, metaphors and imagination. Surely it is profoundly unhelpful to compartmentalise left and right-brain activities. Rational thought and emotion are meant to complement one another, especially when it comes to building strong communities.¹¹

Western society, I am contending, suffers from a split mind. This has particular relevance to Christians who are in conflict with each other. Ron Kraybill, a Mennonite who trains mediators, writes:

People in conflict frequently wage an internal battle between head and heart. By 'head' I mean their values and conscience; by 'heart' I mean their emotions. People think they *ought* to be reconciled with others, but their hearts are not ready. Well-meaning friends...respond in ways that strengthen the 'head' message, but ignore or disparage the cries of the heart.¹²

The more a dispute deepens, the less logical argument moves things forward. Eventually the disputants stop believing that things can ever change between them. In this sort of situation, right-brain activities are desperately needed, in order to stimulate heartfelt *imagination*. The disputants need help to be able to see each other in a new light and visualise possible steps of reconciliation.¹³

But what sort of help? Western society has started to recognise the value of mediation. However, popular books have tended to offer problem-solving approaches, best suited to businessmen or politicians. For example, *Getting to Yes*¹⁴ focuses on helping two parties, each of whom has considerable power of choice, to negotiate a 'win/win' deal. Its linear, step-by-step process¹⁵ is in fact rather left-

9 I am using 'left-brain' and 'right-brain' simply as a convenient shorthand for two styles of thinking. Actual physical control by the left or right side of the brain is not relevant to my argument.

10 The fact that I am writing this piece for an academic journal means, ironically, that I am using a rather left-brain approach in defence of right-brain thinking!

11 See Poe, *Christian Witness*, p 62.

12 In Schrock-Shenk (ed.), *Mediation & Facilitation*, p 31.

13 Gordon Judd, *How the Inclusion of Right Brain Approaches & Activities Enhances Group Conflict Resolution* (unpublished MA thesis, presented to Antioch University, Detroit, 1996), pp 83-85, gives a checklist of right-brain activities that can be used by mediators.

14 Roger Fisher & William Ury, *Getting to Yes*, Arrow Business Books, 1997.

15 See John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures*, Syracuse University Press, 1995, chapter 5.

brain. But, in my experience, mediation between Christians cannot be done 'by numbers' – or by discussion alone. It entails an important element of *restoring relationships*, often between individuals who have unequal power within the church.

It has proved instructive to investigate the approaches used by a range of practitioners in the field of conflict resolution. There is considerable anecdotal evidence that they work extensively with the disputants' personal stories and proverbs, they act on hunches, they stimulate metaphorical communication and they mark turning points by symbolic actions.¹⁶ This is all right-brain stuff. Yet when techniques for conflict resolution are *taught*,¹⁷ the importance of this sort of thing is rarely made explicit. Alastair McKay, Director of Bridge Builders,¹⁸ has taken this point up and believes that his skill as a mediator and a trainer of mediators has been strengthened, and can be improved, by more conscious use of right-brain approaches.¹⁹

I suggest, therefore, that when the Church of England finds itself ineffective at dealing with conflict, it should examine how it could encourage more right-brain thinking. Please note that I am not saying, 'Left brain bad; right brain good.' My concern is simply that human interactions should be structured so that they are not *dominated* by left-brain thinking. I recognise that our society could fall into the opposite danger of accepting almost anything uncritically, so that personal desires always take preference over submitting to disciplines of living in community with others.

Some other ways of doing conflict

Western societies have a poor record of valuing cultures different from their own. However, 'so-called primitive societies often have conflict solutions that are more effective...than those of groups who designate themselves as advanced.'²⁰ The following three case histories describe helpful interactions of western and non-western cultures, and cast light on the 'Church of England way' at different levels.

1) Wi'am: reconciling groups at a local level

Bethlehem is a beleaguered Palestinian town just outside Jerusalem. The tension produced by conflict with the Israelis has had a knock-on effect on social relations. People who cannot find work, whose businesses have collapsed, or whose homes have been damaged, are more likely to be at loggerheads with their landlords, their creditors or their families. From a small unprepossessing office, Zoughbi Zoughbi, a Palestinian Christian, directs the work of *Wi'am* (Arabic for 'cordial relations'),²¹

16 See Judd, *Inclusion of Right Brain*, pp 39-66: Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, chapter 8, and Jennifer Fisher 'Symbol in Mediation', *Mediation Quarterly* 18 (2000).

17 Teaching conflict resolution is a comparatively new idea in Britain but it is a boom industry in the United States.

18 Bridge Builders is a Mennonite service to UK churches promoting better understanding and handling of conflict (see www.menno.org.uk).

19 Personal communication.

20 David Augsburg, *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1992, p 6.

21 The following account of Wi'am's work is based on my own interview with Zoughbi. See further, www.planet.edu/~alashah.

a network of volunteer mediators. Zoughbi studied conflict management and mediation in the West but found that the methods he was taught needed to be modified to take account of cultural differences between Arabs and Americans/Europeans. He has adapted the ancient Arab practice of *sulha*, a carefully devised ritual of reconciliation that aims to restore relations between whole families.

Traditionally, *sulha* involves the following steps when one person has deeply wronged another. First, the family of the offender seeks the help of respected local leaders, who investigate the grievance by visiting the family of the victim and seeking permission to mediate. If this family will agree to renounce retaliation, a period of mourning can begin, followed by payment of a just and symbolic recompense. The families then gather for a formalised shaking of hands, and other signs of forgiveness. The ritual is completed when the family of the offender serves a meal to the family of the victim.

In a town that is in many ways modern, *Wi'am* wins people's trust by using this very traditional process. Vital elements are the careful rehearsing of a story of grievance and the responsibility borne by mediators for making that story heard and understood by the offender. Two families can then resume a joint story in which the grievance has been put behind them. Western Christians should note that the goal is to restore relationships and avoid revenge, not to see justice administered by an impersonal state.²² Recourse to a formal authority would be seen as a failure; *listening* plays a crucial role. *Sulha* is therefore a process much more like that commanded by Jesus (Matt.18:15-16) than are court proceedings in a liberal democracy.

This type of process is clearly most applicable in societies where kinship ties are very strong and a sense of belonging to any larger unit (city or state) is much weaker. However, we should not jump too quickly to the conclusion that British society is never like that. When conflict arises in parish churches, particularly in rural or inner-city areas, it is often vital to interpret it as an issue between families or tight-knit groups, not just between individuals. The right sort of mediation can play a significant role.

2) Musalaha: reconciling groups with large cultural differences

There are followers of Christ amongst both Israelis and Palestinians but they feel no automatic solidarity with each other. Each group tends to see the other as 'of the enemy'. This problem is being addressed by *Musalaha* (Arabic for 'reconciliation'),²³ a project to help Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians discover their brotherhood in Christ. The project is directed by Salim Munayer, a Palestinian Christian who is vice-principal of Bethlehem Bible College. He told me that, in his experience, little progress is made if Christians meet simply to debate theological or political points of view. The context, he said, is 'two tribes fighting

22 See Douglas Yarn, 'Law, Love and Reconciliation' in Filippo Aureli (ed.), *Natural Conflict Resolution*, University of California Press, California 2000, pp 65-68.

23 The following account of *Musalaha's* work is based on my own interview with Munayer. See further, www.musalaha.org.

over the same house.' They have unequal power. One group (Israel) is economically dominant, yet feels victimised; the other (Palestine) is weak. There is little margin for compromise, and no relationships can be built without pain.

One of Musalaha's most effective activities is the Desert Encounter, an 'Outward Bound' sort of venture for young people. Typically twenty to thirty followers of Christ, Palestinians and Israelis, spend five days sharing their lives in completely unfamiliar – and challenging – territory. They live as temporary nomads, pitching bedouin tents and riding camels. Their very survival depends on working co-operatively. According to Salim, the desert 'forces everyone to strip off pretence and games.' Early in the proceedings, participants are given the opportunity to share their own stories of life and faith. Worshipping together, each group learns the other's songs and prayers. The theme of 'The Desert in the Bible' is studied, examining important metaphors such as rock, heat and shadow. Slowly, as the encounter deepens over several days, understanding begins to develop.

During a Desert Encounter, Israeli and Palestinian youngsters listen to each other's very different stories of how they have been affected by the conflict. They find a common language in biblical metaphors. They see a living example of a venture jointly led by Palestinians and Israelis. Many of the young people begin a new joint story in which their common faith in Christ binds them together and their suspicion of one another is replaced by bonds of respect and even friendship. The fruit of this, and other Musalaha ventures, is that a network of prayer and practical support for those 'on the other side' has built up.

This strikes me as a glorious example of recognising and breaking down a dividing wall of hostility (*cf.* Eph. 2:14). It is highly relevant to the Church of England. Admittedly, we are not substantially divided along ethnic lines, but we *are* divided into camps: liberal, catholic, evangelical, charismatic, and so on. Here too, theological debate is a poor starting point for reconciliation and we need places of encounter that strip off pretence and games.

3) The church in Canada: reconciling groups who have unequal power

My final example is not from first hand experience, but it made a deep impression on me when I read about it.²⁴ In Canada, there is a festering grievance between the native people whose communities are breaking down and those whom they blame, the people of European origin. It has led to legal battles but 'all parties are now aware that alternatives to litigation are needed.'²⁵

One alternative has been explored by the episcopal church. In a bid to listen to native peoples within the structures of the church, its General Synod set up The Council on Native Affairs, a body made up of native representatives and operating as a standing committee of the General Synod.

During the 1980s, this Council made two crucial decisions. First, at the request of native elders, it agreed to explore the spiritual roots and heritage of native

24 The material in this section is mostly derived from Joyce Carlson (ed.), *Dancing the Dream: The First Nations & The Church in Partnership*, Anglican Book Centre, Toronto 1995.

25 Eleanor John & John Clark (eds), *Anglicans in Mission: A Transforming Journey*, SPCK, London 2000, p 89.

culture. A convocation was held in 1988, which opened with elders sharing the sacred pipe together in a circle. Sharing of participants' dreams also played an important part in the proceedings. The only non-native participant was the Archbishop, who emphasised that his role was to listen. His humble response proved very important.

The second crucial decision of the Council was to spend time reflecting upon the process and style of its own meetings. Its members had always found them difficult, but why? They decided it was because the 'parliamentary' procedure laid down by the Synod was not part of their own culture. So they adopted instead a traditional native model for making decisions: consensus, achieved by patiently talking in a circle. Having changed the whole style of their meetings, they felt that as Christians they must make 'room in the circle' for non-native people too. They therefore planned a second convocation, and they invited ten non-native members of the National Executive Council so that they could listen and find ways to pass on what they discovered to the wider church.

This convocation, 'Dancing the Dream', was described afterwards by many participants as a deeply healing event. Its key elements were:

- a procedure that made extensive use of traditional symbols, rituals and imagery, both native and Christian.
- an extended opportunity to share native Christians' painful experiences of being forcibly sent to residential church schools.
- an apology delivered by the Archbishop.

Everything was framed by prayer and song, taking the eagle as a symbol for healing. Amazingly, during the final ceremony, held on a hillside, there was an unplanned moment of grace as an eagle soared overhead at the very moment that an elder stood forward to accept the Archbishop's apology.

Notice that this example, like the previous two, embodies certain right-brain elements. In three very different ways, we have seen how conflict was addressed within a ritual framework that allowed careful listening to take place. In each case, participants were encouraged to tell their personal story, communicate through symbols and metaphors, and make gestures of reconciliation. I have found in my own experience that even a simple thing like sitting in a circle and allowing people to speak in turn *without interruption* can make a huge difference to the quality of listening in an angry group. And a symbolic action like holding hands in the circle, or lighting a candle, can help people to express, and deepen, a move of the Spirit in their hearts.

Reforming the Church of England

How, then, can the Church of England go beyond mere reform of its structures? I have three suggestions to make, each of which would need a whole further article to do it justice.²⁶ I hope that they will act as pointers for further thought and prayer.

²⁶ A number of the practical implications of this section are addressed more fully in Colin Patterson, *Learning Through Conflict*, Grove Books, Cambridge 2003.

1) Take the New Testament seriously

As I explained in my previous article,²⁷ the NT can be read as a narrative about building a Christian community, and maintaining it, in the face of internal conflict. The message is clear: there cannot be right relationships amongst believers unless they respond to God's grace, cultivate a relationship with Jesus, remain open to the Spirit, seek wisdom, deal with resentment swiftly, rebuke arrogant leaders, and follow the example of Jesus. Furthermore, this sort of discipleship is not treated as some sort of luxury extra, nor is faith ever seen simply as a matter between God and the individual.

I believe we in the Church of England need to teach much more insistently that the church has a primary calling to be a model community, a fellowship bound together by God's shalom. That calling is especially vital in our own times, given that our society often fails to offer citizens even a very basic experience of living in community.

If Church of England Christians were better at responding to conflict at a person-to-person level, it would have a knock-on effect at other levels too. A useful starting point would be for individuals to work at speaking the truth *in love* (Eph 4:15) about their own thoughts and feelings.²⁸ This is not easy but it *is* possible! Conflict requires constructive confrontation, the essence of which is to talk face to face, setting aside judgement of other people's character and concentrating on reporting one's own response to their behaviour.

2) Train ministers how to handle conflict

How can ministers model and teach behaviour that brings transformation in the face of conflict? Many, like me, have found themselves ill-equipped. At theological college, I was taught how to deal with conflicting *ideas*, not conflicting *people*! But cerebral males like me actually need to be *trained* how to use right-brain activities appropriately: story-telling, symbolic action, communicating in metaphors, helpful rituals, and the like. This is particularly important for those of us who were raised in a tradition of expository Bible teaching – a heavily left-brain activity. For me, a turning point in valuing right-brain approaches came when I realised that, in company with Jesus, I would find him uncomfortably tactile, strangely intuitive in his perceptions, embarrassingly dramatic at some moments and perplexingly docile at others, irritatingly ambiguous with all his parables and cryptic statements...and hopelessly flexible about keeping appointments!

If clergy are to be posted from place to place, they also need to be trained to work cross-culturally. A good deal of conflict at congregational level arises because, for example, clergy unthinkingly import middle-class ways of doing things into working-class parishes, or commend devotional habits that suit nuts-and-bolts extroverts to a congregation full of intuitively-minded introverts (or vice versa, in each case). Cultures then clash and the problem is exacerbated because subcultures within the church speak their own languages and have their own defining rituals. The potential for misunderstanding, and consequent conflict, is thus made even greater in a church that is already very broad.

27 Patterson, 'Dealing with Conflict'.

28 See David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Confront* (2nd edn.), Herald Press, 1980 for practical ideas.

There is a lot that can be done to train people in handling congregational conflict. Such training is now being offered in at least some theological colleges, and through diocesan structures, but I believe it needs to be much more extensive.

3) Re-think the way decisions are made

When decisions are being made, people's faith, feelings and deeply-held concerns are not incidental; they are motivating factors. Bringing them out into the open can help to develop understanding and trust, attitudes which make all the difference between a *constructive* and an *obstructive* group. On the other hand, people who have a superficial relationship with one another and/or with God lack the resources to face conflict positively.

It is never helpful to make decisions as if they had no connection with actual individuals or with God. As I have already indicated, meetings can in fact be arranged so that opportunities to affect hearts and minds are built into the decision-making procedures, not just treated as bolt-on extras. It means embracing right-brain stuff: sharing of personal stories; prayer that engages the imagination and acknowledges the emotions present; seating arrangements that symbolise unity and co-operation; rituals to celebrate achievement and recognise when God has intervened; reflection on Scripture to find guiding metaphors; careful facilitating of dialogue.²⁹ These things give the Holy Spirit room to get past our many words.

'But how can there be time for that sort of thing?' someone may ask. How can there *not* be time?! The alternative is the same sort of galloping paralysis as in secular government: more and more legislation, based on fewer and fewer shared values. Surely the many decisions we make in the Church of England cannot all be equally important. We could try to cover less ground but dig it more deeply. We could try to show our frenzied society what it is like to slow down and listen. We could insistently say, 'Please wait,' to everyone who demands a response by yesterday.

I have personally learned a lot from the practices of the Mennonite Church, especially those designed to build consensus.³⁰ My impression is that Anglicans in general find this to be unfamiliar territory – not because consensus has been tried and found unworkable, but because it has been thought time-consuming and not tried.

Conclusion

A remarkable fact about the NT church is that, while facing conflict, it yet grew and attracted new believers. I have presented a case that left-brain dominance makes it hard for the Church of England to have the same experience. By learning from the example of Christians who take a more right-brain approach, I believe we could see a significant change.

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29 See Howard Friend, *Recovering the Sacred Center: Church Renewal from the Inside Out*, Judson Press, 1998, chapter 6.

30 See Alastair McKay 'Congregational Decision Making' in Carolyn Schrock-Shenk & Lawrence Ressler (eds.), *Making Peace With Conflict*, Herald Press, 1999 for details.