

THE EMBODIMENT OF FAITH WITHIN CHURCH STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES



In the midst of a particularly troublesome conflict situation, a church group decided to utilize the services of an outside consultant. As the consultant sought information about the nature and scope of the problem, one of the members strongly objected to questions concerning the management processes and decision-making practices of the group. He indignantly declared: "Our problem is not organizational, it is spiritual!" This comment – separating the spiritual from the organizational – illustrates the difficulty of thinking theologically, functionally, and practically about the church in an integrated and comprehensive fashion.

What is your experience of conflict in the church? How do you frame or interpret it as you prepare to address it?

This essay will paint a broader context for addressing conflict in the church. It seeks to contribute to a conversation that more wholistically integrates the faith we share with the concrete practices of our church organizational life. To address conflict in the church we must be able to identify and integrate the understandings, experience, and expectations we have of church in the first place and cultivate the embodiment of faith in our organizational structures, groups, and processes.

Is there any relationship between faith commitments and the way we steward the life and ministry of the church? Is there any relationship between faith commitments and the way we express our differences with one another, the way we argue and disagree, or the way we fight with each other? What criteria should the church utilize in determining how it will address concerns with organizational power and influence, structures and processes – or conflict for that matter?

Most churches in North America, historically and currently, imitate the sort of organization prevalent in the society. The best and the worst of managerial methods often are brought wholesale into the church, knowingly and unknowingly. It has been said that churches have “merely accepted the bondage to the world’s example from which the gospel is supposed to free us.” (Gritsch and Jenson). Within this

perspective religious organizations are to be no different in their organizational expectations and experiences than other human organizations.

There is widespread disregard for the theological nature and quality of church organizational life and practice.

Community as the Koinonia of the Holy Spirit

The discussion of community today is too often framed in terms of opposing polarities. At the one extreme, the primacy of the heritage and structure of the collective group is assumed. In this "traditional" view, it is believed that individuals are summoned to submit and conform obediently to the community's preexisting beliefs, ideals, and practices. What is best for the social order is claimed to be best for the individual. At the other extreme, the primacy of the rights, interests, and choices of the individual is assumed. In this "modern" view, it is believed that community is a voluntary association formed exclusively for the protection and enhancement of individual preferences, well-being, and advancement. What is best for the individual is claimed to be best for the community.

The point of this essay is that these opposing polarities do not exhaust our options. Christianity is neither an autocracy nor a democracy. Christian community does not affirm either the sovereignty, unity, and harmony of the social whole or the authority, independence, and self-definition of the isolated individual. Human persons are the creation of a creative, dynamic, and relational God. Human persons therefore are understood to be creative, dynamic, and relational beings. Personhood is formed through interaction and relationship with other persons and the wider world around us. *Thus primacy is given neither to the group nor to the individual, but to the mutuality of relationships.*

To Be or Not To Be In Community?

What if we were to move beyond the polarity of collectivism and individualism into categories of community? This perspective emphasizes the social and relational qualities of human life. No human person exists in isolation from communal ties, values, languages, traditions, and practices. The belief in autonomous individuals who choose, form, and live their lives in complete isolation from the sentiments and standards of others is an illusion. Thus the real choice is not whether or not to participate in community, the real choice is between kinds of community. Thus the challenge to the church is not to promote community-in-general, but to be clear about the distinct and unique kind of community the church is called to be.

The Koinonia of the Holy Spirit

Christian community is theological. That is, it is not formed by human efforts, individual or collective, but by the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God is dynamic. The Spirit is the life-giving power of the church, guiding and inspiring Christian community. And the purpose of Christian community is not to fulfill individual self-interests nor to further the goals of the organization or hierarchy.

The purpose of Christian community instead is to create and sustain "a community in whom humanity can be enlightened by faith and return to God in worship and love as the first fruits of a new creation" (R.P.C. Hanson, "The Divinity of the Holy Spirit"). Life in the Spirit has been brought into being by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Life in the Spirit is manifested in "a radically new kind of community, a new humanity united in Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit to live according to the standard and character of a new order" (Jim Wallis, *An Agenda for a Biblical People*). The Good News of Jesus Christ is to be concretely embodied within the life and practice of a forgiven and redeemed people!

In the New Testament the term *koinonia* is used to name this new fellowship of holy living, loving concern, and mutual support. Challenging the old competitive order of self-interest and private privilege (*idios*), Christian community indicates a new collaborative order which is shared, common, and public (*koinos*). Participating through faith and baptism in the triumph of Jesus Christ over the powers of sin and death, Christians are empowered to move beyond the boundaries of their individual lives into the shared reality of Christian *koinonia*. Contemporary presuppositions, expectations, and experiences of the church have largely blinded us to the radical nature of the biblical sense of communal life. Within this community, transcending the barriers of race, gender, class, language, creed, and culture, the "consciousness of being God's beloved sons and daughters made Christians brothers and sisters of one another" (Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith*).

Personhood Manifested in Love

Here is the core of the Christian understanding of personhood: "brothers and sisters of one another." No longer separated and isolated individuals, no longer functional units of a larger whole, personal fulfillment, integrity, and freedom are found through deeply mutual relationships of love. As "members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19), the purpose of life is transformed from self or group advancement to that of loving "the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind...[and] your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-39). Liberated from slavery to their own needs and desires, Christians are freed to participate in the wholeness of life. Love of friend and of stranger become possible as believers delight and grow in the redemptive love of God. "To be a perfect human being, a human being the way God intends human beings to be, is to be a fully loving person, loving God, and every bit as important, loving God's image, the other people who share the world with us" (Roberta Bondi, *To Love as God Loves*).

Christian love is not simply a spontaneous warm and positive emotion of comfort, familiarity, and satisfaction. It is a long-term disposition: a whole way of being, feeling, and understanding. As a total orientation, a way of seeing and acting habitually, Christian love is cultivated over a life-time. And it is within the ongoing life of Christian community that believers are to learn and practice the behaviors, attitudes, and habits that enable them to participate in the movement of God's love. Involvement in the community is not optional. God's love and the love of one another cannot be separated. To love "the other" is to encounter God, and to love God is to encounter the neighbor, "for those who do not love a brother and sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen" (1 John 4:20).

The Practice of Christian Community

Love stands at the heart of Christian community, as its starting point, its motivation, its goal, and its content. Yet wanting to love does not make us loving persons. "Learning the ways of love is a matter of unlearning deep patterns of domination and submission and passivity and violence that we, in our not-always-Christian culture, have come to believe are just the way things are or perhaps even the way God wants things to be" (Roberta Bondi, *To Pray and to Love*). While the desire to love and be loved may be a part of human nature, most of the time human beings fail to love or love badly. Christian love is grounded not in our good intentions, good will, or good deeds, but in conversion: profound transformation from alienation to reconciliation. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

"The gospel is the proclamation of the presence of freedom, the reality of love, the movement of peace, and the establishment of justice. These are not to be contemplated, debated, or respected, but accepted, appropriated, lived, and manifested" (Gene Davenport, *Into the Darkness: Discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount*). The patterns of life and practice of the church are to be determined and evaluated by how well they nurture, model, and enable the fullness of Christian love. The church, as the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit, is called and empowered to be the social embodiment IN the world of God's love FOR the world. This is the uniqueness of Christian community: Christians are to be God's demonstration people, learning to love by "practicing" with one another. In the midst of worship, prayer, study, and service, the purpose of Christian community is to enable Christians to "love as God loves." Those who "live in the Spirit" are to "walk by the Spirit" and thus exhibit the relational fruits of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What does it mean to say that Christian community is theological?
2. How are human nature and its fulfillment understood within this model of community?
3. How does Christian love differ from the modern romantic view of love?
4. What within the life of your church nurtures, models, or enables Christian love?
5. How is Christian community different from an autocracy? ...from a democracy?

The Expression of Community within the Church's Organizational Life

The *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit formed by the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ offers a vibrant image: a community of openness and engagement which welcomes difference, encourages creative conflict, and nourishes the freedom for innovation. Rather than a warm "soft fuzzy," this image of community lifts up the radical challenge of loving as God loves: "Christian community is that place where the persons we least want to associate with and those least deserving have a rightful claim on all that we have and are" (John Westerhoff, *Living the Faith Community: The Church that Makes a Difference*). Thus this image challenges a narrow view of community which seeks an intimate, closely-knit, homogeneous--comfortable--gathering in retreat from the world and public life. Based in the conversion of our fears and anxieties to hope and courage, the community formed by the movement of the Holy Spirit cannot be achieved by human intentions and efforts, however well-intentioned. Christian community is realized only by the creative power, redemptive love, and transformative presence of the Triune God.

As a forgiven and reconciled people, the church is called and empowered to be a sign, a foretaste, and an instrument of an alternative social order: a community where God's will is done "on earth as it is in heaven." Living as God's people is not a vague, romantic, or idealized dream, but a concrete way of life which has practical and definite consequences: "God's reign comes when we can regard all strangers as sisters and brothers; when we can embrace those from whom we are estranged; when we can unite in one congregation diverse racial, social, political, economic, and ethnic groups; when we can seek justice for those who are least deserving or lovable; when we are freed from private life, private property, and private commitment and led into public life, public property, and public commitment; and when the needs and concerns of the world's outcasts are made our agenda for prayer and service" (Westerhoff).

How will we incarnate this theological vision of community within the organizational life of the church?

The Witness of the Church's Organizational Life

Usually when seeking to build an open and collaborative climate – Christian community – the focus falls upon the development of various kinds of "fellowship" groups. It is assumed that within these small face-to-face groups persons will offer and receive support, care, and nurture. Often overlooked is the quality of life within the administrative or leadership groups of the church. Little attention is given to the use of power and authority, the way information is shared, the nature of decision-making, the openness and receptivity of church leaders, the quality of peer relationships, the process of determining organizational goals, or the manner of recognizing and affirming organizational involvement. A distinction is made between formal and informal, work and social, administrative and fellowship groups. Further, concerns for faithfulness or spirituality are assumed to apply only to the life of the informal or social groups, while the criteria of effectiveness or efficiency are to guide the agenda of the formal or work groups.

Yet the church is called to manifest the qualities of Christian love--compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience (Colossians 3:12) – not only in informal gatherings, but in all aspects of its life and work. In fact, many informal groups flounder because they have not given appropriate attention to organizational skills: participatory decision-making, cooperative planning, shared leadership, and the creative utilization of conflict. Within an impersonal, fragmented, and competitive world, these relational skills do not come naturally. They must be learned, tested, and practiced within a community of people who come together to participate in God's new creation: an alternative way of living and working together. In the actualization of its mission – proclaiming and embodying God's forgiving and reconciling love – all aspects of the church must be both faithful and effective. In other words, there must be a linkage and correspondence between what the church embodies in its organizational life and what it proclaims in its worship life.

Creating a Climate for Group Development

The claim is being made that the form and style, process and content, attitudes and practices of the church's organization – its formal and informal groups of all sizes and shapes – are a vital and creative way both to develop and express Christian community. These groups are called to cultivate a spiritually enriching and personally supportive climate for their life and work. Indeed, it is usually within these groups that persons learn the organizational skills needed to develop and participate in the study, support, and service groups of the church. The challenge is to cultivate a trusting and supportive climate which moves beyond a defensive and competitive "business" orientation.

Extensive comparative research has identified six key characteristics of work groups which release the energy, stimulate the motivation, and utilize the gifts of persons as they engage in planning and carrying out the ministry of the church.¹

Supportive. *The group provides an opportunity for persons to discover their gifts, utilize them in service to God's church, and have their personal self-worth and importance affirmed.* All of the interaction, problem-solving, and decision-making activities of the group occur in a supportive atmosphere, even when there is strong conflict. The commitments and goals of the group are formed through an open and interactive process which involves all group members. The group leader uses leadership practices which communicate that all members of the group are important persons who can make a valuable contribution to the group. Group processes are employed which encourage cooperative interactions rather than competitive ones which pit the concerns and interests of members against one another. Recognizing the importance of their work, and affirming the need for the wisdom and gifts of all concerned, group members are eager to help one another develop to their full potential.

¹ These characteristics originally adapted from the work of Rensis and Jane Likert are built upon research in organizational disciplines with an eye toward those practices which enable the church to embody faith within its common life and shared ministry.

Receptivity. *The group actively seeks and uses the knowledge, opinions, concerns, experience, and ideas of all members.* The group leader and each member are genuinely interested in any information on any relevant matter that any member of the group can provide. Members feel free, and multiple opportunities are made, to talk openly with the group leader and with each other about matters related to their common life and work. A climate is cultivated which enables the sharing of the diversity of histories and dreams. Receptivity is furthered in the group by continually clarifying group norms, encouraging the expression of differing views, listening and learning from one another, avoiding too-early solutions, building on partially-formed ideas, and affirming the contributions of others.

Teambuilding. *Members develop an relational climate of cohesiveness which results in a commitment to the aims and objectives of the group.* Members are skilled in interpersonal and group dynamics and processes. The group has been in existence sufficiently long, and has spent enough time together, to have developed well established and relaxed working relationships. New members are intentionally welcomed and incorporated into the life and work of the group. Members seek to surface and confront potential areas of conflict--as opportunities for enriched learning. The cohesiveness of the group is not the result of conformity or uniformity, but of the unity which comes through exploring, sharing, growing, and working together. Members of the group are highly motivated to abide by the major commitments and to achieve the important goals of the group.

Performance Emphasis. *There is an accomplishment-oriented atmosphere in which members are willing to set goals that are high.* Having participated in their formation, all members accept willingly and without resentment the goals and expectations the group has established for itself. The group seeks and prizes creativity and attaches a high value to innovative approaches and solutions to its problems. The leader and members believe that each group member can grow and stretch. Evaluating their work according to their shared commitment to the mission of the church, the members of the group are highly motivated to achieve the important goals of the group.

Work Facilitation. *Members of the group intentionally seek to support and help one another in carrying out their work.* Members give each other the help they need to accomplish successfully the tasks and goals set by the group for each member. The style of working together ensures that the feelings, concerns, and needs of each member are given the attention by the group which they deserve. All members are encouraged to share fully and frankly with the group all the information which is relevant and of value to the group's activities. Members are knowledgeable of and utilize communication processes in ways which best serve the interests and objectives of the group. An intentional effort is made to identify, nurture, utilize, and affirm the diverse gifts of all members.

Decision-Making. *The processes of the group ensure all members fully participate in making the significant decisions that affect the group.* The group generates and shares the information needed for decision-making, allows sufficient time for exploration and discussion, makes a free and informed choice, and builds internal commitment to the choices made. The group is flexible and adaptable: ideas, feelings, goals, and attitudes do not become frozen. Members expect and are strongly motivated to influence one

another and are receptive to being influenced by other members. Consensus methods of decision making are used which enable the group to explore a range of options and seek to combine various persons' ideas into an optimum solution, rather than pushing for a "win/lose" vote on what may be a minimally acceptable solution.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What do you perceive to be the differences between the formal and informal groups in your church?
2. How are the qualities of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience manifested within the organizational life of your church?
3. How do you think the six characteristics of work groups reflect or contribute to Christian community?
4. In what ways would you like to strengthen the quality of life and work within your church's organization?

The Center for Parish Development's consulting process "Building Collaborative Leadership Teams" helps church organizations and their leadership teams identify areas needing improvement and equips them better to embody their faith in the concrete policies, processes, and structures of their church organization.



738 East Dundee Road, Suite #210
Palatine, IL 60074

Website: www.missionalchurch.org

email: cpd@missionalchurch.org

773-752-1596