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Leading God's Flock from Rough to Still Water:
The Role of the Pastor in Eatonton First United Methodist Church's Tensions Over Worship

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Abstract

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Within every church there will be conflict. The pastor is often viewed by the congregation as the one to handle the conflict by creating compromises and offering solutions. However, taking such roles often leaves a pastor at the center of the conflict and as the antagonist. The better role a pastor can take is to break with the default role of pastor often assigned to us by congregations, embody healthy qualities of leadership, and to teach and develop with our congregations a model and practice of peacebuilding. By teaching our congregations a process for engaging conflict, we give them the ability to transfer such models to handle new conflicts that arise.

Leading God's Flock from Rough to Still Water:
The Role of the Pastor in Eatonton First United Methodist Church's Tensions over Worship

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Conflict within a congregation is inevitable. International peacebuilder, John Paul Lederach notes that one verifiable reality that exists in this world is that there will be conflict within human relationships.¹ Because the church is a community of relationships where people with different lives, backgrounds, hopes, wants, and opinions intertwine, friction is bound to occur. Sometimes the friction is about the color of the carpet, the budget, a particular ministry program, or the musical selections of our worship services. Though the source and subject of the conflict may vary, there will be times of conflict within every congregation.

Since conflict will be present in a church, what is a pastor to do in the midst of it? How should we lead those entrusted to our care when turbulent seasons and situations arise? Should we focus our role on “keeping the peace” by helping ourselves and the congregation avoid a conflict? Should pastors “make peace” by handing down decisions that seem to lay the conflict to rest? Or is there another role a pastor should embody in the midst of congregational conflict?

In her book on the role of female leadership in ministry, Karoline M. Lewis says that ministerial leadership must be communal in the sense that pastors should collaborate with others on the tasks of ministry while also remaining the one called to ordained leadership.² A pastor must not be either the sole decision maker or leave church members to work the conflict out themselves. Like Lewis, I believe the most faithful role is somewhere between. When a faith community faces conflict, the role of the pastor should be to call others to work together and to lead them in practices that allow them to build a peaceful future together. Peter Block calls this middle way of leadership being a “convener.” The main responsibilities of this type of leadership

¹ John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (New York: Good Books, 2003), 5.

² Karoline M. Lewis, *She: Five Keys to Unlock the Power of Women in Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 174.

are creating contexts in which an alternative future is nurtured, initiating and organizing conversations that shift people's experiences of the conflict, listening, and paying attention to ourselves and others.³ According to Norma Everist, a professor of church administration, it is well within a pastor's authority to decide the methods a church will use to handle conflict. She writes, "Pastors can use their authority to decide (or together with others help decide) what methods a group might use to deal with conflict."⁴

My particular context is Eatonton First United Methodist Church (Eatonton First Methodist) which has experienced a longstanding conflict over contemporary worship⁵. It is important to note that while the conflict first presented itself as a conflict over worship style, the conflict was really about a congregation not having a process for dealing with its conflicts. The best way to address this conflict was not for me to create another new worship solution by simply changing the services' times or blending music styles. The best way for me, as their pastor, to address the conflict was to develop with them a congregational process for engaging conflict and building peace. Such a process requires a different vision for the role of pastor in congregational conflict.

Peacebuilding and community building approaches, like those of John Paul Lederach and Peter Block, contain helpful methods for leading this congregation to examine and resolve their conflict. Because of this conflict, some pastors of Eatonton First Methodist have often been viewed as avoiders or antagonists of the conflict. In the end any decisions the pastors made to

³ Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009), 88.

⁴ Norma Cook Everist, *Church Conflict: From Contention to Collaboration* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 119.

⁵ The formal name of the church is Eatonton First United Methodist Church. It is commonly referred to as Eatonton First Methodist. I use the commonly spoken name throughout the rest of this paper.

keep peace or make peace in the worship life of the church have not survived after the pastors' departures.

Because peacebuilding and community building methods involve the larger community in any immediate resolutions or future visions, I believe they are more likely to lead to sustainable change.⁶ These approaches are less focused on an individual making a decision alone and more on teaching a community to embrace conflict as a catalyst for faithful change. Such methods center on helping all involved develop listening and decision-making abilities so that they see a larger view of the conflict and how to create peace together.

Peacebuilding reminds the community that they possess within their life together all they need from God to build peace for themselves.⁷ To help a community build peace and a shared future, pastors must ask others to search their own motives, views, and practices. They must also attune themselves to their own motivations and practices of engaging with and listening to others.

Within this paper, I describe how both my view and the congregation's view of the longstanding conflict changed over the course of the last year by using some key principles and practices of peacebuilding and community building. To describe this reorientation, I divide this paper into four sections. The first section treats the history of Eatonton First Methodist's worship conflict and its sources up to the present. Most of this information was garnered through interviews with a group of leaders central to the conflict but with varying perspectives, because there is very little information available in the way of files, budgets, or bulletins. The church has

⁶ John Paul Lederach, *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2014), 115.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

not kept careful records. This group of leaders is also the group that received the proposed plan for peacebuilding.

The second section examines the theological basis for the pastor acting as peacebuilder and four ways a pastor can best practice that role within congregational conflict. The third section discusses four of the best practices of peacebuilding taken from existing scholarship. This section attempts to assemble these four practices into a plan to be offered to the church's leadership as a way for them to transform their conflict and build both a sustainable peace and better forms of worship.

The fourth section of this paper recounts the small group's response to the proposed plan for peace building. This section surveys how this plan is beginning to be enacted within Eatonton First Methodist and assesses its success in order to consider possible future directions. It also summarizes how the peacebuilding plan has helped the congregation transform a new contentious situation. In the end one can see that peacebuilding is a process that can be used to assist churches whenever they are in conflict.

The History and Sources of Conflict at Eatonton First Methodist

Lederach says, "Conflict transformation starts with an understanding of the greater pattern, the ebb and flow of energies, times, and even whole seasons..."⁸ It is important to understand the seasons and sources of the church's conflict. Eatonton First Methodist exists in a largely agrarian, rural community. It is the county seat and only town in Putnam County, an area sitting at the heart of Georgia's midsection. Eatonton is home to several famous Georgia authors such as Alice Walker, Flannery O'Conner, and Joel Chandler Harris. Stories are deeply woven into the fabric of the community. This is partly why there is little written history of Eatonton

⁸ Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 16.

First Methodist. Yet, if you ask any long-time resident they will gladly tell you what they were told.

The church itself was founded in 1857 when local businessmen and landowners decided to purchase a plot just outside the town square to host a Methodist church. The congregation opened the doors to the original sanctuary on Easter Sunday the following year. Over the years Eatonton First Methodist continued to grow in membership, financial resources, and buildings, especially after the construction of lakes Sinclair and Oconee.⁹ Once the sanctuary could no longer comfortably hold all who wanted to worship on Sunday morning an additional early morning traditional service was created.

In 1995, Eatonton First Methodist began a two-phased building campaign to create a new large fellowship hall with a stage, nursery rooms, church offices, additional classroom space, and a new sanctuary. Some leaders expected the stage and fellowship hall would house a more contemporary worship service in the future.¹⁰ According to one of our longtime members, the first phase was finished and dedicated in early 2000.¹¹ The second building phase was to include the new sanctuary, which was formal in style.

In 1999, new churches began populating the lake areas. Member 1 said, “Prior to the lakes, we were one of the few churches in town. People would drive up to fifteen miles for church. The lakeside churches offered lake residents a closer option. The addition of lake churches caused noticeable shifts in attendance and giving at Eatonton First Methodist.”¹² Many of the new lake churches offered contemporary worship services. Member 2, a longtime leader of

⁹ Frances T. Wood, *Faith of Our Fathers: A History of the United Methodist Church in Eatonton, Georgia* (Milledgeville, Georgia: Boyd Publishing Co., 1995), 80.

¹⁰ Much of the information regarding the history and perceived sources of the worship conflict is derived from interviews with members of the church and its staff. The names of all interviewed have been changed.

¹¹ Member 7, interview by author, Eatonton, GA, September 22, 2017.

¹² Member 1, interview by author, Eatonton, GA, October 2, 2017.

the church, noted that with these changes “Eatonton First Methodist’s membership rolls, monetary giving, and weekly worship attendance dipped. Some members asked the church to explore offering a contemporary service.”¹³

At the time, one pastor and other church leaders “felt it best to continue offering only traditional services.”¹⁴ The leadership was unsure whether the church could handle the costs or the conflict sure to come with a new venture, especially while repaying the loan for the new building. As attendance and giving continued to decline over the next four years, the church leaders laid aside the plans for the new sanctuary and made the fellowship hall stage into a chancel space.¹⁵ Many who had hoped for a contemporary worship service began questioning if Eatonton First Methodist would have one with the stage’s transformation into a formal chancel.

During these years of decline another pastor curtailed the financial and membership decline of the church by introducing large budget reductions and the first contemporary worship service. According to that pastor, a contemporary service revived their last church and they were eager to see if it would stop the membership decline at Eatonton First Methodist. The service was held between the existing traditional services.

There were a number of complaints about the addition of the new service. According to Member 1 and Member 2, some felt it undermined the importance of Sunday school for children and youth.¹⁶ There were noise complaints from the older adult class that met over the fellowship hall. Lastly, the worshipers at the early service “complained that the pastor was not present throughout their entire service.”¹⁷

¹³ Member 2, interview by author, Eatonton, GA, October 2, 2017.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Member 1, interview; Member 2, interview.

¹⁷ Member 3, interview by author, Eatonton, GA, September 28, 2017.

By the end of the first year, three different worship leaders had resigned over artistic differences with the pastor, membership, and bandmates. Because of the lack of a designated worship leader and band, a few volunteers and the pastor purchased recorded contemporary tracks for people to sing with in the service. The music remained this way for two years. The service lost momentum and attendance floundered. It was during this time that the pastor insisted on a transition in youth directors. Member 1 recalled, “The attendance steadied after one new youth pastor began leading the service, changed the location, and introduced live instruments again.”¹⁸

Another pastor had strong interests in the contemporary service. They preferred it boast a full band and meet on Monday evenings. Over the course of the first two years of their tenure they hired and dismissed four worship leaders. Member 3 noted that most hires were made by the pastor alone; the decision did not come through the proper leadership committees.¹⁹ This made some in leadership uncomfortable.

After a few years the pastor decided that they also wanted to transform the 11:00 a.m. traditional service into a contemporary one. They instructed the music director to shift the choir and their music to the early service. They struck many of the traditional liturgical elements from the order of worship. Member 3 recalled sixty families welcomed this change.²⁰ However, more in the congregation and choir questioned these decisions. This led to much conflict between the pastor and the membership over the course of eighteen months.

The pastor eventually decided to give up on their hopes for an 11 a.m. contemporary service after a donor purchased an organ for the fellowship hall. Most of the sixty families highly

¹⁸ Member 1, interview.

¹⁹ Member 3, interview.

²⁰ Ibid.

invested in a contemporary worship service on Sunday morning felt the addition of the organ was the final nail in the contemporary service coffin. They removed themselves from the worshipping life of Eatonton First Methodist, purchased a building, and opened their own non-denominational church.²¹

Choosing to move the 11am service back towards a traditional worship style meant that some of the tensions between the pastor, the choir, and the membership subsided. However, the tension did not go away completely. The pastor's last five months of ministry at Eatonton First Methodist were fraught with smaller, continuous outbursts of hurt and conflict. For instance, Member 4 regularly recalls when the pastor chastised the choir before worship on a Sunday. She said, "We were told that we were part of the reason the church was not drawing young people."²² In the pastor's last sermons they said the church would never grow because the congregation was too set in its way when it came to the worship style of the church. Member 5 noted, "The last days of their tenure were filled with personal, bitter remarks between the pastor, the choir, and the membership."²³ The conflict took on new energy and form. Member 6 who was in favor of contemporary worship said, "While the pastor made a valid point, the way they said it did not soothe anyone's spirits."²⁴

When I came to Eatonton First Methodist I was immediately confronted with the conflict. My first day in the office was filled with members offering their varying perspectives on the history of the worship conflict. It is not uncommon for a new preacher to hear such hopes and hurts. As Mark Chaves writes, "Congregations' central purpose is of course the expression and transmission of religious meaning, and corporate worship is the primary way in which that

²¹ Ibid.

²² Member 4, interview by author, Eatonton, GA, October 11, 2017.

²³ Member 5, interview by author, Eatonton, GA, November 11, 2017.

²⁴ Member 6, interview by author, October 14, 2017.

purpose is pursued.”²⁵ When a new service is introduced, or an existing service transformed, the rituals of a congregation and individual roles are disrupted. Such disruptions often produce in a congregation’s mind a sense that more than the style of music is changing. Perhaps their very values and identity are shifting. David Brubaker suggests that such thinking is often at the core of congregational worship conflicts.²⁶

Lederach suggests that to build peace leaders must look beyond presenting issues or the episode of a conflict, as he terms it, to see the sources behind the conflict, or the epicenter.²⁷ Understanding that the conflict centered in the congregation’s worship life, I made no changes during the first six months of my tenure. I needed to get a feel for where they were and where they had been.

Through my conversations with people at the center of the conflict I discovered that most of their frustration was over the lack of communication regarding changes to services, the high turnover rate of contemporary worship leaders, and the perception that former pastors unilaterally made worship decisions. Member 3 likened the development and presentation of the services to a ricocheting effect. “Often times, whatever group talked to the pastor last is what dictated the next change in the services.”²⁸

These three sources of congregational and staff frustration guided how I handled worship changes after my initial months with them. However, it must be noted that even if there had been regular communication of changes, meetings with the larger leadership committees, and a

²⁵ Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 127.

²⁶ David R. Brubaker, *Promise and Peril: Understanding and Managing Change and Conflict in Congregations* (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2009), 61-67.

²⁷ Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 31.

²⁸ Member 3, interview.

long-term worship leader, conflict over worship would still have been present. As Chaves and Brubaker described earlier, any disruption to a worship pattern often results in conflict.

I also want to note that according to the United Methodist Church's *Book of Discipline*, a pastor is given authority by the denomination to lead the worship life of a congregation.²⁹ Often this passage is interpreted as giving the pastor final authority on all matters of worship. The pastor is the one who can add a service, introduce new music styles, change the service times, or delete a struggling worship option. My predecessors were following a common interpretation. There was no infraction in their leadership. Yet, making decisions for the congregation only put the pastor in the center of the conflict and often as the antagonist.

Peter Block discourages such a role saying, "The attention on the leader makes good copy, it gives us someone to blame and thereby declares our innocence, but it does not contribute to building community. In its own way, it reinforces individualism, putting us in the stance of waiting for the cream to rise, wishing for a great individual to bring light where there was darkness."³⁰ For the most part, the congregation expected their pastor to deal with this extended conflict in the way they have, even if they failed to like individual pastors approaches or opinions. Everyone has a view about worship, but few lay members see themselves as responsible for the congregation's worship life and decisions. Church members contribute to the tension and conflict, but often have not been given a constructive role in changing it. Until they are invited into a role and taught a process for how to engage conflict, they will continue to look to the pastor as problem-solver, never finding for themselves a sustainable change or peace in

²⁹ The United Methodist Church, *Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶340.

³⁰ Block, *Community*, 41.

their worship life. This is another reason teaching the congregation to work through their own conflict using peacebuilding and community building methods is vitally important.

After seeing that the regular Monday evening service attendance was less than ten people and that no one could consistently lead the band, I sat down with the members of that service. Together we decided to cease offering it, talked about how this worship change should be communicated to the congregation, and agreed to encourage the church's worship committee to create a contemporary style service with the resources needed in the way of equipment, staffing, and congregational support within three years.

I also encouraged the worship committee to relax the format and order of our 11 a.m. service to include more lay participation. Together, we removed several elements of the liturgy, encouraged casual wear, allowed laity to read scripture, and incorporated contemporary music selections twice a month. So far, the members of the church have expressed support for the worship committee's work.³¹ We have a long way to go in creating a sustainable change when it comes the contemporary worship options at Eatonton First Methodist. Our work has been slow and deliberate. However, the changes we have made are helping to build trust and relationships between the membership and the pastor, which is crucial to our greater goal.

The Why and How to Use Peacebuilding and Community Building Models for Ordained Leadership in Congregational Conflict?

Having spent time understanding the length and complexity of Eatonton First Methodist's conflict and its context, I see the need to engage them and their conflict differently. The church did not benefit whenever prior pastors either avoided the issue of contemporary worship or became the driving force for its resolution. Such leadership appears to have only prolonged the

³¹ Member 1, interview.

division, caused frustrations on all sides, exhausted pastors, and led to worship changes that vanished with pastoral transitions. The best way to help this congregation is for me to model faithful United Methodist ordained leadership that uses community building and peacebuilding models as templates for handling congregational conflict. In this section, I want to explore the theological underpinning for ordained leadership functioning this way in conflict and how I might practice such leadership in my present context and its conflict.

In his book on the theology and practice of ordained ministry, William H. Willimon describes pastors as “servants of the servants of God.”³² Pastors are those who are called by God and the church to equip church members for the work of ministry in the world and to build up the faith community. Willimon says, “Pastors do those things that need to be done to enable the church to be the church.”³³ Of course this includes responsibilities like teaching, preaching, presiding over the consecration of the sacraments, and regular administrative tasks like ensuring a realistic budget is followed, convening committees, and encouraging their work. Yet, the work of the pastor is also to help a congregation engage each other and their conflicting views in such a way that participants are edified and empowered to live a new shared vision as a result of conflict. If conflict is not addressed properly and processed in a healthy way it can cause damage to individual members and to the ministry of the church as a whole. Conflict, either avoided or squashed, may prevent the church from being the healthy, unified body of Christ within their own communities.

I believe one of those necessary things a pastor must do to help the church be the church is to lead the congregations to view conflict as a mechanism for change and help them work

³² William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 44.

³³ *Ibid*, 38.

through conflicts together. G. Douglass Lewis echoes this idea. He says that conflict management is one of the main but often avoided tasks of ordained leadership. Serving as a conflict manager means being the one who ensures the conflict is addressed through a process or method. He writes, “The pastor, whether effective or not, is the primary manager in the system. For the health and vitality of the church and its members, conflict management must be a pastoral priority.”³⁴ Embodying and leading our congregations through peacebuilding processes is a way to effectively lead in times of congregational conflict.

While the pastor’s role in conflict can be that of managing the mechanisms or initiating the methods for how the congregation addresses its conflict, it is important to understand that effective pastors do not develop processes for handling congregational conflict from afar. We are not consultants. Rather, we lead from a place and role of leadership within the congregation. Charles Bugg states, “Clergy are called to do ministry with people and not just for people.”³⁵ Ordained ministry in the United Methodist Church means we are to live and minister within the community to which we are appointed. God has called us to serve a particular place and its people for a season. Pastors should strengthen and assist their congregation in fulfilling God’s mission for them as a faith community, even if part of that ministry is managing a process for understanding and transforming conflict.

We do not only lead our churches in methods to resolve and transform conflict because it is our calling, but also because we believe it is also the church’s calling. Norma Cook Everist writes that because Christians are reconciled to Christ we are called to be reconciled with each

³⁴ G. Douglass Lewis, *Resolving Church Conflicts: A Case Study Approach for Local Congregations* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1981), 21.

³⁵ Charles B. Bugg, *Transformational Leadership: Leading with Integrity* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc, 2010), 12.

other by collaboration through conflict.³⁶ In a world riddled with division and conflict, the church can model a way of living together that unites people together despite differences in preferences, beliefs, or practices. We lead our people in practices of peacebuilding and community building because in our own way we are showing the world that though we are many and different, we as Christ's body the church are one. When it comes to the turbulent and troubled times in the church, our congregations have all they need given to them by God to find their way to a transformed, peaceful existence. Kretzman and McKnight, experts on asset based community development (ABCD) models, note that every single person in a community has gifts, abilities, and skills. Strong communities exist where the members along with their abilities, skills, and gifts are identified, valued, and employed.³⁷ The pastor's role should remind them of this truth and lead them through the conflict, teaching them to build peace and imagine a different and sustainable future for themselves.

The first way we do that is to teach our congregations that conflict is a catalyst for congregational growth and transformation if we engage it together in healthy and faithful ways. In my conversations with leaders at the center of conflict, I often remind them that God calls us to greater faithfulness, new life, peace, and justice not just once but regularly. We are called to engage the beautiful and broken places within us, the church, and the world. I believe God is speaking to us in every context, even in a contentious one. God longs for us to live faithfully in and through every situation, including conflict.³⁸ God gives us as the church and its pastor the support, gifts, and guidance we need for everything. It is the role of the pastor to remind a church

³⁶ Everist, *Church Conflict*, 153.

³⁷ John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Towards Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 1993), 13.

³⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 12.

who God calls them to be and that they have all they need to become Christ's loving, unified, and diverse presence in the world.

Given the context and conflict at Eatonton First Methodist Church, I believe the best way for me to move the congregation's understanding of pastor from peacemaker to peacebuilder is to embody four important leadership habits for peacebuilding: Break the default role often assigned, offer more questions instead of answers, become a non-anxious presence, and call the community to an imaginative future. Each of these qualities I believe will reorient the pastor's role within the church and its conflict and aid them in transforming their conflict and creating a more collaborative and sustainable worship future for themselves.

In his book on transformational leadership, Charles Bugg says that when it comes to the presence of conflict everyone has a "default" position, style, or way of dealing with conflict that makes them more comfortable in its presence.³⁹ Whenever conflict arise over worship at Eatonton First Methodist, the default position is that it is the role of the pastor to handle the conflict and make the final decisions regarding worship. Part of the reasoning behind this default, as mentioned earlier, is a common but unfortunate interpretation of a passage about the duties of the pastor as outlined in *The Book of Discipline*. The passage actually states that among the duties of a pastor is included to "lead in worship and ensure faithful transmission of the Christian faith."⁴⁰ Since worship is a primary source for the transmission of the faith, this is often why people make the pastor the final authority when it comes to making decision about worship.

I believe a better way to interpret this passage is to see the role of the pastor in worship as one that regularly convenes the membership of the church in faithful discussion and collaboration on the topic and practice of their worship. By inviting others in the conversation,

³⁹ Bugg, *Transformational Leadership*, 62.

⁴⁰ *The Book of Discipline*, ¶340.

we give others responsibility for the results, or buy-in. For a number of years at Eatonton First Methodist there was a worship committee on the record, but this group was rarely convened, consulted, or involved in any worship decisions. Member 1 stated, “We were simply a group on paper.”⁴¹ It was during these years in which some of most contentious conflict episodes occurred. At Eatonton First Methodist it is essential for me to step out of the default position of pastors and to communicate that decision to the members. I must invite and encourage them to be a part of the discussion, the decisions, and the results if we are to build any sort of peace or lasting change.

The second practice I must embody is learning to ask questions and provide fewer answers. It is easy for a pastor to be seen as an expert in all matters of the church. As a culture, Peter Block says we “romanticize leadership.” We hang on to the notion that leaders are the way to build a better community.⁴² He also says that the best way to break this perception of leadership and strengthen the community is to have the leaders who convene conversations ask more questions and avoid giving advice. He writes, “Questions open the door to the future and are more powerful than answers in that they demand engagement.”⁴³

It is important for me as the pastor leading them through the long-standing worship conflict to engage them with questions that invite them to own both the issue they see and their role in transforming it. Powerful questions I might ask them could include: “What story from your own experience embodies the conflict in our church?” Or, “How are you going to contribute to the resolution of your complaint?” Questions like these require people to do two things. They

⁴¹ Member 1, interview.

⁴² Block, *Community*, 41.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 101.

ask them to own the conflict in the church. Secondly, they invite the people to accept their role in changing the issue.

As a pastor it is easier and faster to simply supply the answers to a struggling church. Poet Mary Oliver captures this for me in her poem, *The Man Who Has Many Answers*.⁴⁴ She writes,

The man who has many answers
is often found in the theatres of information
where he offers graciously his deep findings.

While the man who has only questions
to comfort himself, makes music.⁴⁵

It is easy to be the one with the answers for the community. We can be the source of information and sometimes we might need to be. William Willimon tells seminarians to be reluctant to change anything in their first year of ministry in a church, while also changing what clearly needs immediate attention.⁴⁶ I tried to find this balance during my initial year at Eatonton First Methodist. After my first six months, I realized that there were some decisions I needed to help them make initially, like dissolving the Monday evening service and creating more opportunities for lay participation. These were helpful and necessary changes. They were also changes I knew would aid us when later addressing the conflict of contemporary worship.

However, I knew I must be careful and not skip ahead and provide the answers or solutions when the better way was to work the process. It takes more time for pastors to inspire and call our faith community to work through their conflict to create something better. That is often why we rush to answers. Yet, asking questions of our congregation is an important way for

⁴⁴ The lines and spacing of this poem follows that of the author's.

⁴⁵ Mary Oliver, *A Thousand Mornings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 69.

⁴⁶ Willimon, *Pastor*, 286.

them to discover their own answers and abilities. Creating any sustainable change for a congregation calls for me to remove myself from being the sole source of the solution and become more of a conversation partner and committed participant. I must ask questions that give those present voice and responsibility.

If I want my congregation to engage in practices that build peace and transform their conflict into lasting worship changes, then I must model such a posture for them. I must show them how to listen deeply and look beyond the problems to the complex relationships that exist because of and sometimes in spite of conflict. I must show them how to engage conflict without becoming consumed by the emotions resulting from it. One of the best things I can do to pastor in anxious times is to be a non-anxious presence. In his book *Failure of Nerve*, Edwin H. Friedman offers great advice on this very point, saying, “The leader who has clarity about his or her own life goals is someone who is less likely to become lost in the anxious emotional processes swirling about.”⁴⁷

Since the pastors at Eatonton First Methodist have often been at the center of the conflict and sometimes viewed as the antagonist of it by members of the congregation, it will be important for me to engage the conflict with them without placing myself at the center of it. To do this I must know myself well and keep at the forefront the understanding that my role is to participate with and lead the congregation to build peace and a future for themselves with regard to contemporary worship. A healthy pastor does not allow the affirmations or opinions of others to dictate their focus, their sense of worth, or their identity. The greater goal is to teach Eatonton First Methodist how to work through their conflict together while collaborating on a more helpful, fruitful future for all.

⁴⁷ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 2007), 14.

The last quality I must embody as I lead Eatonton First Methodist through their long standing worship conflict is to be one who calls them to collaborative imagination. Being a leader who calls others to imagination does not mean just making something up. Charles Bugg defines a pastor's need for imagination in this way: "Imagination is the ability to dream about and then visualize the possibilities of what we can do with God's help and our efforts."⁴⁸ Collaborative imagination is essential to peacebuilding. In order to move from being divided by what has been, we must begin to imagine what can be. Within my context, I encouraged those I initially worked with to imagine and describe what a vibrant, inviting worship service, apart from what we presently offered, was for them and also for their neighbor not attending worship services. I invited them to share it through making something visual, creating a descriptive story, or demonstrating through music or some other mode a glimpse of what their future worship services contained. It took time for people to buy into this approach because most only imagined creating a list of what worship should be and do. At first they did not understand how to create a visual or musical representation of their future worship hopes.

Eatonton First Methodist has long been living into what has been and what is when it comes to worship. They have spent many years reacting to the worship decisions of others. They have done this for so long that reaction has become a default position for them. They know how to react. What they must learn to do is reimagine worship. There has never been a concerted effort or process which allows them to imagine the worship future for their church. I believe they have the ability to create a faithful future for their worship life as a congregation. It will be important for me to assure them of this ability to create and to help them set up a process by which to imagine and collaboratively create their worship future together.

⁴⁸ Bugg, *Transformational Leadership*, 46.

A Plan for Building Peace Together

Given the history of the conflict, its length and its depth, I believe that any plan to build peace and create a future must be taken in slow, deliberate steps. To simply create another worship service or revamp an existing one will not help. It will only bring continued aggravation. While a new or different worship service might be the end result, that is not the primary focus for me as their pastor. My hope is to liberate them from constant turbulence surrounding the topic of contemporary worship and to help them create a process for engaging conflict with all its complexities and relationships and use it to build peace and change within their community.

The first step in the process is to build a group of diverse people who are not afraid of change. David Brubaker alludes to the need for this as a first step when he writes, “Leaders who want to change their societies (or congregations) start by building a diverse group of change agents who must first learn how to cooperate with each other.”⁴⁹ I have this group in place in the form of our resurrected worship committee.

Over the last year, the leadership and I have reimagined the purpose and possibilities for this group. I wanted them to be an active, creative group and not just a list of names on a piece of paper. Worship chairman Tim and I intentionally worked with the nominations committee to fill our worship committee with a diverse cross-section of our church. We included people from the different services, staff members, musicians, choir members, those appreciative of contemporary music, and those appreciative of traditional worship music and style.

With this diverse group, we started by having them talk about the conflict surrounding the worship life of the church for the last twenty years. We made sure to offer ground rules for

⁴⁹ Brubaker, *Promise and Peril*, 126.

the conversation. Each person was able to tell the story as they understood it. They were asked to think about how the conflict affected them and the church. They were also asked to name what had been lost for them in the conflict. No one was to offer any responses or critiques of another's story as it was told. They were instructed to listen deeply as the person shared. Then we gave the group three minutes between the stories to reflect on what emerged out of the stories.

After everyone shared, I invited each person to take five minutes to identify the words, phrases, or images that were consistently present in their notes. Then we took time to share this information. What emerged was a set of patterns that described the common hopes and hurts between them with regard to worship. People heard how those who wanted contemporary worship felt like their needs and hopes were not valued by the church. Those present also heard how those appreciating traditional worship styles felt pushed aside when the services tried to go all contemporary. People spoke dynamic worship being more important than any particular style. People talked about loss of identity and role. They described how a lack of conversation and communication had really caused the conflict to become destructive. Through these conversations, I was able to watch this diverse group of leaders move from blaming others to claiming their own contributions to the conflict. They took ownership for what had transpired and communicated a desire to create a different environment in the church. They also asked if we could host a conversation like this one for the wider church.

Peter Block says the most important task of a leader is to create spaces for people to convene and have conversations that shift their way of thinking. Through the kind of engagement we created for our worship committee people discovered it was within “their power to resolve something or at least move the action forward.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Block, *Community*, 88.

Because of that early fall meeting, the worship committee agreed to convene the larger congregation into several conversational experiences that would provide healing and a movement forward in evaluating and designing our church's worship services.

The first step to build peace and initiate transformation was to convene a conversation like the one the committee first had. We planned to have twenty round tables in the room and lead the group in deep listening as people told their story of the conflict. I would describe how the evening would go and the larger purpose for it. Then members of the committee volunteered to facilitate the table discussions as well as the large group's summary sessions.

The next part of our plan was to convene another conversation around creating a conflict timeline with the congregation. Dudley and Ammerman in their book, *Congregations in Transition*, suggest the practice of a congregational timeline to get at the history of a church.⁵¹ I wondered if we could employ this practice to create a timeline of the conflict. Would mapping the major decisions, players, and issues teach us not only what had been done, but also what previous habits and decision to avoid as we moved the congregation forward? Members of the worship committee wanted to give it a try.

As we did during the first congregational conversations, each table would break into small groups and receive a long piece of paper with the last twenty years printed on it. In their groups they were called to mark on that timeline the memories, decisions, major players, and issues associated with the contemporary worship conflict across the years. Each group would have thirty minutes for this exercise. After that, the groups would reconvene. On a long piece of paper on the wall we would ask each group to mark their five major dates on the timeline. Again, listening and watching for pattern would be crucial.

⁵¹ Carl S. Dudley and Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregations in Transition: A Guide for Analyzing, Assessing, and Adapting in Changing Communities* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 63-104.

A few weeks later we would create another series of conversations for collaborative imagining. In *The Moral Imagination*, John Paul Lederach talks about the importance of peacebuilding and transformative conversations taking place around a dinner table. “By the way of food and drink around a table, the old world is suspended momentarily. A new world is entered... and people move beyond the blockage of exchanged demands.”⁵² Because worship at Eatonton First Methodist is an important topic for many, I encouraged the worship committee to host at least three meal conversations imagining the worship future of our church.

At these gatherings, to ensure diversity at a table, we would try to randomly disperse the attendees by having them draw a table number. As pastor, I would remind everyone of the importance of listening to everyone answer the provided questions before any offered a response. At each table each person would answer a series of four questions:

- 1) What is meaningful and dynamic worship to you? Offer a description or example.
- 2) If you could add anything to our worship services what would it be? Why do you feel this is important?
- 3) What gifts do you have to create dynamic worship for our church?
- 4) What is your big idea for worship in our church that you have not shared with others? List the resources it would take to turn your idea into reality.

After allowing each table to answer these questions, we would have a facilitator lead the group in identifying and summarizing common hopes and ideas. Each table would report to the large group. People would be invited to ask questions of groups that peaked their interest. Everyone would be reminded that there are no wrong or right answers, only ideas.

⁵² John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Peace Building* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 110.

At the conclusion of the session, we would communicate to people that the worship committee would use their ideas and imaginative collaborations to guide them in creating a comprehensive three to five year plan for worship at Eatonton First Methodist. The committee would have two months to work with the people's ideas and then would share with these same people a hopeful, comprehensive plan for sustainable worship at Eatonton First Methodist and seek their reaction and response.

The last step in the plan for peacebuilding and changing the worship life of Eatonton First Methodist would be to schedule additional conversations in which other members of the church can hear the worship committee's plan. Because there is a history of people not being invited to share their honest questions and best ideas about the worship life of Eatonton First Methodist, it will be critical to hold these sessions. Peter Block reminds us that allowing people to voice their doubts and dissenting opinions is another way of letting "people find their space and role in the future."⁵³ Dissent, if we welcome its voice, can make the future possibilities clearer and more realistic.

Response of the Small Group and Responding to a New Contentious Situation

This was our preliminary plan for building peace and a sustainable future around the topic of worship at Eatonton First Methodist Church. However, our plans had to shift after a major financial mismanagement issue was discovered. Several employees allegedly stole upwards of \$100,000 of the church's money over the course of several years.

When the financial mismanagement situation was uncovered, I and other leaders feared we might have a new conflict on our hands. Tensions in the church were high. Some of the leaders who had helped in exploring the topic of congregational conflict asked if we could take

⁵³ Block, *Community*, 133.

parts of the processes we had created to deal with the worship conflict and apply them to this new situation. We decided to try it in an abbreviated form. To our surprise the practices of convening, allowing space for dissent, lamenting what was lost, and inviting others to imagine a new future for the church worked.

For five months, the leadership of the church hosted meetings around the financial mismanagement situation. At the first meeting we informed the congregation of the issue and invited them to help us put together a timeline of activity. Those conversations helped us clarify lingering questions like employee hire dates and points in time where suspicion and questions were raised. This information helped us learn the full extent of the damage. We were also able to put a temporary plan and volunteers in place to cover the staffing gaps.

At the next meeting we informed the congregation of our Trustees' decision to have the police investigate the matter. We allowed space for questions and invited those who might feel differently to voice their concerns and wishes for a different response. By allowing people to have their say, they were able to remain a part of the ongoing discussion because they felt they had been heard and their ideas had been valued.

While we have not been able yet to work the plan for building peace and changing the worship services of Eatonton First Methodist, it has been exciting to watch the practices and ways of convening work successfully. What could have been a seriously divisive issue in the church over mismanaged funds has brought the congregation closer and generated new ideas and models for staffing, financial accountability, and congregational volunteering. We also were able to raise twice the amount we needed to cover unpaid bills resulting from the mismanagement within a month of asking the congregation.

In this process I was able to practice peacebuilding and community building qualities and habits of leadership. I was able to witness the creativity and resiliency of the congregation and together we are finding a way forward. Using these practices and methods of peacebuilding and community building has also brought some of those divided around the topic of worship together. The members of the congregation now know they can handle anything as long as they handle it together. Their confidence in their abilities has grown even though the situation revealed their vulnerability and areas of weakness. I cannot say the process we went through with the financial mismanagement situation was perfect. However, we learned a great deal about who we are, who we can be, and what we can do together.

Our hope is to restart our efforts following the resolution of the financial mismanagement situation. Part of this reasoning centers upon the amount of time required by our plan. While I believe the plan is appropriate for helping Eatonton First Methodist to deal with their worship conflict, it does require time and effort from the membership and me. One of the drawbacks of peacebuilding and community building models is that it requires intentionally adhering to processes and regular conversations, which takes time and the investment of all involved. The financial mismanagement situation placed a limit on what we were able to accomplish with our plan for addressing the issue of contemporary worship.

Yet, the worship committee does not wish to cease working on the issue of contemporary worship altogether. In the interim the worship committee asked the congregation for feedback on how they can continue creating meaningful worship experiences with a variety of worship styles. They have received feedback from eighty-one individuals. They also have created a new team within the worship committee to design special altar scenes and other visual art pieces that enhance our sermon series. The trustees and worship committee are gathering bids to install

blinds in the fellowship hall that will allow the incorporation of different forms of lighting. The worship committee and music staff have continued to incorporate contemporary musical selections twice a month in the existing services.

In my conversations with the worship committee we remain committed to following our plan for peacebuilding and change regarding the issue of contemporary worship in our congregation. I look forward to seeing and participating in what this congregation will accomplish together through their next endeavors.

Conclusion

As United Methodist pastors we make a vow to support our denominational polity as contained in *The Book of Discipline*. It is a helpful book. However, the vagueness of its language makes it prone to misinterpretation. As I pointed out earlier, there is an unfortunate interpretation regarding the authority of the pastor in the matters of a congregation's worship. This interpretation often generates a style of leadership that is contentious, unhelpful, and counterproductive. It gives the pastor the ability to make worship decisions alone. If anyone was capable of making decisions around such important ministry matters alone, it would have been Jesus. Yet even he decided that the best way to do ministry was with people, not just for them. Karoline Lewis says his leadership was companionship. She writes, "His leadership was one of accompaniment and encouragement, of advocacy and truth-telling, of deep purpose and love."⁵⁴ We are called to lead as Jesus led.

There are decisions that we as pastors must make because of our ordained authority in the church. It should be the exception rather than the rule for a pastor to make unilateral decisions. For instance, if a church is near death or in extreme crisis, a pastor may not have the time to stop

⁵⁴ Lewis, *She*, 182.

and invite people to healing, helpful, and imaginative conversation. There are things pastors could do better if we did it ourselves. We also must make sure we do not allow our churches to make fatal decisions. Yet, it is important that pastors remember that some of our main responsibilities are to encourage, equip, and build up the church for ministry to the world. If we make major decisions for them we may, in some instances, be depriving them of becoming a stronger faith community.

The choice of a worship service's existence, time, and style of music should not be a decision pastors make alone. Such decisions affect more than just the pastor, they affect a faith community. Making such decisions alone, as in the case of Eatonton First Methodist, often leads to long-standing congregational conflict. Decisions around a church's worship services are ones that the pastor and congregation should make together.

Eatonton First Methodist's most divisive conflict was over contemporary worship. For another congregation it may be something else, perhaps the color of the carpet, line items in the budget, or a particular program. Most congregations' pastors are appointed to will have some conflict. It may not greet a pastor on her or his first day in the office, but conflict will make itself known. It is vital that pastors take time to learn the history and sources of a congregation's conflict before they make a decision or try to move the congregation towards change. As pastors we must know what our role is when it comes to congregational conflict and we must know how to help our congregation through it. By incorporating practices from peacebuilding and community building models, we can help both ourselves and our congregations find not only a way through the conflict but a shared vision for their future.

The resolutions already reached and forthcoming from applying practices of peacebuilding and community building models has Eatonton First Methodist looking towards a

better future. The decisions and attitudes of the congregation indicate that incorporating such models into our ministry can generate positive change. I have seen it work and my congregation has, too. We have built confidence in going about this together. I look forward to working with the congregation in the time ahead to finally bring an end to the long, divisive history of worship conflict at Eatonton First Methodist.

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