

*If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell them Work it out between the two of you.
If he/she listens, you've made a friend.
If they won't listen, take one or two others along,
So that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest-- then try again.
If they still won't listen, tell the church.
Matthew 18: 13-1 7a The Message*

It has been said, "Where two or more are gathered, there shall be conflict." Somewhere we have assimilated the idea that there should be no conflict in the church and/or that all conflict is bad. Conflict is normal, and present wherever two or more human beings are gathered together. Difference of background, experience and understanding are part and parcel of conflict in relationships. We can't or won't always agree, especially as American Baptists holding tight to our four fragile freedoms. It is, in fact, our differences that add to our community being rich and interesting.

The issue and our witness then, is not the conflict, but how we chose to handle it. This verse in the New Testament offers wise advice. If you have a problem or someone has hurt you, go to that person. Be honest in a responsible way. If you sincerely state your feelings: i.e. "when) interrupt me, it makes me very uncomfortable" or "I feel scared when you raise your voice to me," or "it was hard for me to hear your say ... could you explain?" and the person simply will not hear you, then take another believer along with you and try again. In our church, you could ask a deacon, a member of the Staff Relations Committee, or a Pastor to go with you. That's what they are here for.

I have always wondered why people believe it is more hurtful to go to a person and share our concerns, then talk to five or ten other people about that person and have it come back round that person via the "grapevine". It is a matter of trust and respect to go directly to the person and even in our fear and vulnerability to address the conflict at hand as adults traveling together on Christ's pathway.

In his book entitled Clergy Killers, Guidance for Pastors and Congregations Under Attack, G. Lloyd Rediger, offers a list of the characteristics of health in a congregation: (page 184)

- Smiles, laughter, celebration (not flippancy)
- Sense of reverence and respect (not piousness)
- Witness to God's salvation (not parochial triumphalism)
- High levels of affirmation and recognition (not jealousy)
- Exploratory learning and programming (not stodginess)
- Allergic reactions to injustice (not entitlement)
- Quick recuperation from setbacks (not victim-thinking)
- Passionate stewardship (not possessiveness)
- Chronic interest in negotiating difference (not competitiveness)
- Persistent positive expectations (not complaining)
- Sensitivity to each other's need (not exploitation)
- Efficacious care for pastors (not employer-employee attitudes)

While we await our heavenly gathering, we must remember that it is not about an end product or reward but it is all about our actions of a lifetime on this path together as fellow believers.

Serving together, In Christ,

Pastor Joanne