

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

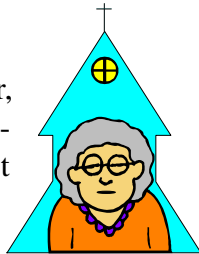


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Anger in the church

In the church I see a lot of anger, both mine and other people's. I wonder why, and I wonder what's the best way to deal with it. Two books I've recently come across, along with some recent church events, have brought that subject freshly to my mind. The books are by Andrew D. Lester, a professor at Brite Divinity School. One is *The Angry Christian: A Theology for Care and Counseling* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). The other is *Coping with Your Anger: A Christian Guide* (Westminster Press, 1983). Neither of these deals specifically with church-related anger, but as I read I kept thinking about how Lester's analysis and advice might apply to it.



A bad reputation

Anger has a bad reputation in our society and especially in the church, Lester reminds us. Anger is related to positive values such as justice, self-defense, and independence, he observes, but "many Christians put anger in the same category as lying, stealing, cheating, and using profanity."



In addition, many church people feel very uncomfortable when they encounter anger or even disagreement. I'll never forget the Sunday School class friend who suddenly stopped attending. When I expressed concern, she said, "I couldn't stand all that conflict." I was amazed. "What conflict?", I wondered. I hadn't noticed any. We had recently started discussing topics on which class members didn't all agree, but to me that had made the class interesting for the first time.

Although I often see anger in the church, the proportion of church members who get angry when dishonesty, injustice, and incompetence appear seems

Worship—anemic or alive?

I don't know what to do about attending worship services that leave me feeling deadened and angry. I know that staying away from worship isn't a good solution for the long run, but what is?

At a retreat last week, I attended three worship services daily for five days and left each one feeling enlivened. They were quite different from those that for many congregations are standard—the anemic kind, one attender called those.

Silences for reflection



At the retreat I attended, we entered worship silently and kept silent until the service began. Silent reflection time followed several parts of the liturgy.

The services used a traditional liturgy, with a call to worship, Psalm and Gospel readings and responses, prayers, benedictions, and at least once a day a sermon and the Eucharist. However, all of these used contemporary language and didn't use exclusively masculine words for God. We said the Lord's Prayer many times, but never in the "Our Father who art in heaven" translation. Instead, we used the "Ecumenical Version" and other recent translations and paraphrases.



Today's words about today's life

Most hymns and responses used recently written, non-King-James-style words. They were clearly based on scripture but were also related to today's life, and were often set to familiar hymn tunes. The songs had substance. They weren't the 7-11 kind with seven words repeated eleven times. The sermons were pithy, too, though brief. Some preachers were lay. The preachers and other worship leaders were different at every service.



Part of what I liked about these worship services was the absence of familiar rote ingredients. We never recited a creed or sang the Doxology or Gloria Patri.

Many Christians would dislike such services, but in them I felt I could give God my best, not what I find meaningless or offensive. I could focus on God and on what God asks of me. I felt inspired, not angry.

surprisingly small. Most members don't even seem to want to know what's happening. I wonder why, because when a relationship is threatened, not feeling angry or wanting to know what's wrong usually shows apathy. I hope church members' apparent lack of concern reflects not apathy toward the church but merely their dislike of conflict and their feeling that everyone should always be "nice."

We worship "being nice"

As Andrew Lester points out, our society worships "being nice." That means being friendly, polite, and thoughtful—all desirable qualities—but the most important ingredient in niceness, observes Lester, is never showing anger. "It is necessary to smile constantly even when you are mad," he explains, "because nice people do not confront, enter into conflict, or 'make waves.'"

Behaving like this all the time, however, leads to dishonesty. Honesty and love seem to require speaking up about attitudes and behavior that oppose the church's God-given calling.

Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into the one who is the head, into Christ ...
—Ephesians 4:15

Centuries of misleading teaching

Many of us learned the requirement of always being nice mainly from our parents—I certainly did—but we also learned it at Sunday School. There, explains Lester, "we learned about that sweet man, Jesus. They forgot to tell us that Jesus got angry!"

"Underneath our society's suspicion of anger," Lester finds, "lie centuries of Christian teaching that anger is evil." In the Middle Ages anger was called one of the seven deadly sins. But anger actually comes not from the Fall but from creation. Anger is part of our basic humanness, not our sinfulness, so having faith can't do away with it. Anger is our reaction to feeling threatened, and human beings can't live without seeing their finitude as a threat.

Most Bible verses that warn against anger, in Lester's opinion, describe godly

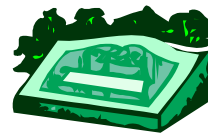


[Jesus] looked around at [the Pharisees] with anger, and grieved at their hardness of heart ...
—Mark 3:5

persons not as those who never feel anger but as those who are careful with their anger. Jesus, Lester believes, "was calling attention to the devastating results of unreconciled anger, not the experience of anger itself." What's important for us, it seems, is evaluating what we get angry about and learning how to express our anger in nondestructive ways.

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger ...
—Ephesians 4:26

Many kinds of threats



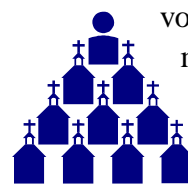
The perceived threat that triggers our anger can be spiritual, emotional, or physical. Some spiritual threats are unavoidable, so getting angry about them isn't surprising. These include the prospect of death. They also include disasters that can make us see life as meaningless, make us doubt that God is in control, or make us question whether everything really works together for good for those who love God.

We perceive other threats, however, from other people's actions and our own. We feel threatened when someone's actions lower our self-esteem or keep us from getting opportunities we feel we deserve. We feel threatened, too, when we fall short of what we think of as our ideal self—our hopes of being perfect. Having ideas important to us disregarded, ridiculed, or declared worthless can also feel like a threat. So can feeling helpless.

When we're angry about the church, then, it may be because we've invested a lot of time and energy in it but feel that investment hasn't mattered or has been destroyed. Our anger may come because beliefs we've staked our life on are being questioned or even shown to be untrue. We may get angry because the church is rejecting what we consider our God-given gifts and calling. It may be because we see church decisions being made that we consider unwise but don't seem to get any



voice in. Our anger may be because other members are given leadership positions we feel more qualified for. And we often feel helpless to influence the institutional church system.





Humor can disguise anger

Anger has a positive function but it also can be distorted and misused. Physical violence is its most obvious misuse, but we also express anger through subtle but poisonous words and actions. These include nagging, being silent, forgetting, being late, withdrawing, procrastinating, having sexual affairs, and delivering looks that could kill.

Humor is one of the most common disguises for anger. What claims to be mere kidding often aims at hurting someone through ridicule. So does sarcasm. Laughing is the socially acceptable way to react to this barbed and veiled anger, but such humor isn't really funny. Its real purpose is to embarrass, expose, or cause hurt feelings.

Barbed humor is most often used in social situations that prevent the victim from responding. That's why it's so potent. I see it often in groups of clergy. They evidently feel they must be genial with each other, but the jealousy and competitiveness that our system fosters makes a lot of their humor barbed. Of course, lay Christians often use barbed humor, too.



We try to escape responding

We often develop habits to delay, escape, or avoid responding to our angry feelings. Common ones are laughing, going for something to eat or drink, smoking, or losing oneself in a newspaper or book. (That last one, along with losing myself in working crossword puzzles, hits home with me.) In addition, we often deny anger because the reaction it has triggered seems so painful or unacceptable that we want to ignore it. We suppress anger, too.



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We recognize it but push it out of our awareness because it feels so scary.

Unfortunately anger doesn't go away when we use these tactics. It stays alive and active inside us. In Lester's view, anger then becomes demonic. It gives birth to hate instead of promoting love. It pushes for punishment, alienation, and vengeance instead of forgiveness and reconciliation.

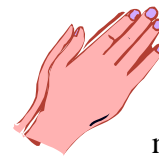


Lester reminds us that destructive responses to anger move us toward spiritual dysfunction and damage our health. Internalized anger is often expressed in physical symptoms, depression, and if we're angry at ourselves, self-mutilating behaviors.

Anger can be our spiritual ally

Creative ways of expressing anger move us and our community toward spiritual well-being instead. By improving our way of responding to the anger we feel, we can protect our health and also make anger our spiritual ally and guide.

- Anger can uncover guilt and shame. We may feel guilty about having destroyed or violated the unique potential God has given us. We may have mistreated someone. Because of what we've done or failed to do, we may fear God's condemnation. Even worse, we may fear it is final. Acknowledging such feelings lets us start seeking forgiveness and making needed changes.



- Anger can also be what Andrew Lester calls an "idol detector." What makes us angry can show what our real values are. If our anger seems out of proportion to what has triggered it, that's likely to be a clue that we've given a human attachment the importance that only God deserves. God doesn't need

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.



to be defended, but idols do. We thus get angry when someone point out their deficiencies or tries to break our attachment to them. If our pastor preaches about the sinfulness of having needlessly expensive clothes, cars, or hobbies that we don't want to give up, we get angry. If the pastor denounces an injustice we're part of, we get angry. If our church wants to move our class to a different room from the one we've met in for years, we get angry. When we're worshiping an idol, we don't want to admit its weaknesses or have it taken away from us. We get angry when it's threatened.

- Anger can be an early warning system, showing us what hinders our progress toward the abundant life God wants for us. The threat that arouses our anger may be a nudge to abandon a childlike dependence on our parents. It may be the frustration we feel when something blocks our path to goals we believe God calls us to reach. We may see the church itself as the block, and get angry with the church.
- Anger can be a moral response to evil, too. How can we tell whether our anger is that or not? And how can we respond appropriately to our anger? More about those questions next month.

Barbara

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June 2003

For Cain and his offering [God] had no regard. So Cain was very angry ...
—Genesis 4:4-5

Good sense makes a [person] slow to anger, and it is his [or her] glory to overlook an offense.
—Proverbs 19:11

Pour out your indignation upon them, and let your burning anger overtake them ...
—Psalm 69:24

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder, and whoever murders shall be liable to the judgment." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister you shall be liable to judgment ...
—Matthew 5:21-22

**We get
mixed messages
about anger**