

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Becoming the healers we need

What might we Christians be for this world, asks Thomas W. Porter, Jr. in *Conflict and Communion*, if we let ourselves become agents of healing? What if we led our communities in forgiveness? The great issue of our day, Porter believes, is how to break out of the cycles of retribution and violence that are tearing our world and our relationships apart. I suspect Porter is right about that, even though I'm skeptical of his claim that taking our Communion liturgy seriously is the key to bringing healing to the world.



Our ways aren't Jesus' ways

 *Conflict and Communion: Reconciliation and Restorative Justice at Christ's Table* (Discipleship Resources, 2006), is a collection of essays suggesting ways of dealing with conflict that differ from the ways we now use most often in the church and the world. Our churches' main way of dealing with conflict is avoidance, the book reminds us, and the world's main way is physical violence, but Jesus rejects both of these.

Unfortunately this book is so full of churchy jargon that it's a chore to read, but it describes some practices I'd like to see used in my congregation and others. It also made me think more deeply about the issues it raised, and about some implications it didn't address.



Finding a better way

Porter, whose essays form the framework of this book, is a United Methodist clergyman and also a trial lawyer. He directs the United Methodist Church's JUSTPEACE Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation. His views have been strongly influenced by time he spent in South Africa studying its Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

A roundtable worship experience

In *Conflict and Communion*, ethics professor William Johnson Everett describes his church's bimonthly Sunday evening worship service. It's a kind I'd love to have available. Here's its format.



- ✓ Words of invitation and response, perhaps from Jesus's parables about banquets or feasts.
- ✓ Simple songs whose words express the holiness of God beyond gender and other human conventions. Everett admits it's hard to find words and symbols that fully avoid patriarchy, monarchy, and outmoded cosmologies, but for the whole service his group tries to use symbols and words that "open up a way out of an oppressive and stifling religious past."
- ✓ Affirmations of God's goodness and care, focusing on thankfulness rather than penitence.
- ✓ Informal sharing of food and drink, leading into conversation in a circle. A moderator introduces the conversation by reading a thought-provoking selection from the Bible or some other source.
- ✓ Prayer, ending with a fresh expression of the Lord's Prayer, such as this one. "O Source of Life, You alone are holy. Come and govern us in perfect peace. Give us today the food we need. Release us from sin as we release our enemies. Save us in the trials of judgment. Liberate us all from evil powers. For in you is our justice, our constitution, and our peace. Amen."



A challenging form

Everett finds that such a service requires group planning and personal development, plus attentive listening and the habit of reflecting on one's actions. Also, participants need knowledge of scripture, Christian tradition, and human wisdom, and awareness of what is currently going on in the world. These qualities in participants would enhance every form of developed worship, of course, but Everett sees the need for them especially in this form.

Doing more to promote these qualities among our members could help them experience God's presence more often in worship. It could also help them see how God was calling them to help heal conflict and promote justice in today's world.

That study showed him that when we dehumanize others we dehumanize ourselves. Through his South Africa experience Porter saw that forgiveness was essential. He realized the power in having both victims and perpetrators of harm tell their stories. His understanding of justice moved away from the usual focus on punishing offenders. He began to see justice instead as a process that involves all the people who have a stake in a specific offense. He recognized justice as a process that addresses harms, needs, and obligations in order to put things as near right as possible.



Connecting Communion to conflict

At the table of Holy Communion, Porter believes, we can find the place, the time, the ritual, and the spiritual power necessary for healing relationships, because the one who heals is the host of the table. Gospel accounts of the Last Supper, Thomas Porter notices, show Jesus taking the main steps necessary for dealing with conflict and injustice: naming the offense, engaging the conflict, and practicing reconciliation.

By moving from the head to the foot of the table and washing his disciples' feet, Jesus confronted the lack of humility that characterized the social fabric of his day. He named the conflict within his own group by announcing that one would betray him and the rest would deny or desert him. Rather than punishing, humiliating, or dismissing them, however, he gave all of them bread and wine, symbolizing forgiveness.

I'm afraid Porter is unrealistic, however, in attributing so much conflict-resolving power to our practice of Communion, because we aren't all aware of these meanings in it. We also miss the connection between Communion and the conflicts in our

Jesus ... got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel ...
—John 13:4-5

Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me."
—Mark 14:18

... Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters ..."
—Mark 14:27

midst, or between Communion and the changes necessary for healing the conflicts and stopping the injustices that have led to them. In order to have the influence Porter attributes to it, Communion would have to acknowledge conflict more openly, make more explicit its connection to what Jesus did, and more directly advocate healing.



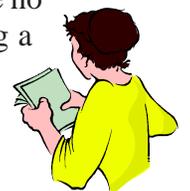
A healing process beyond Communion

Churches in conflict need to help members share stories, define how they all will be held accountable, receive apologies from each other, and arrange to right wrongs as far as possible. For this, Communion alone is not enough. Although Porter and the other writers in *Conflict and Communion* suggest that Communion can resolve conflict, they also recommend a separate process. In it, everyone affected by a certain offense sits in a circle together. One at a time, led by a trained "steward" of the process, they tell their stories and express their hurt.



First, the leader names the setting as sacred and describes how the process will work. Then she asks a question that invites people to open their stories and express their hope for the circle. A symbolic object is passed around the circle, with each person speaking only while he or she holds the object. Further questions lead participants to deeper responses. The cycle is repeated as many times as needed. Then the leader summarizes any consensus reached and reviews any plan the group has arrived at.

This process aims at taking enough time to reach a new, restorative relationship. Since no conflict-resolution process can bring a complete solution immediately, it may go on for days, weeks, or months. Feelings take time to change.

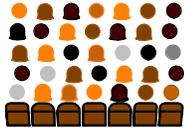


Conflict and Communion describes the circle process in much greater detail. The authors emphasize that for such a process to be useful and not harmful, its leader must be skilled, with special training beyond the scope of the book.

What about congregation-wide conflict?

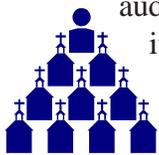
Such a circle process may be an effective step toward resolving a conflict in which one person had

harmed another or only a few. But what if the conflict involved a whole congregation? How could enough members take part in the process to heal the group? A large group could break into small circles, but that doesn't seem likely to promote the openness or consensus that could come when all participants were in one circle. A small governing group might benefit from using the process, but to deal effectively with a larger conflict, naming the issues at stake and hearing people's stories would need to go far beyond official "church leaders." I wished that the authors of *Conflict and Communion* had addressed this point.



Seeking outside help

I was sorry, too, that they didn't suggest asking a neutral outsider to lead the conflict-resolution process in a congregation. Clergy are probably the main audience for *Conflict and Communion*, but



it's likely to be hard or impossible for them to lead the resolution of conflicts in their own churches. All leaders who are deeply involved in the life of the church are involved in any church conflict. They may even be part of the cause, if only by refusing to acknowledge that harm is being done. Examining their role is essential to resolving the conflict, yet their position makes them anything but neutral.

For this reason I wish bishops, supervising clergy, and local pastors were more open to enlisting outside help in resolving conflicts. When issues go beyond the local church or involve supervisors themselves, resolution may even require calling in trained mediators from another administrative region or from another denomination.



What really harms the church?

A conflict can be resolved only when those causing harm change their behavior, or, if that's not likely, when they're removed from the scene. But what if harm isn't so easy to define? What if, instead of clear perpetrators and victims as in South Africa, there are just people who strongly disagree?

Sometimes what looks like harm isn't. By conventional standards, Jesus's very openness at the Last Supper might seem harmful. Why bring conflict into the open at such a solemn feast? Yet putting everyone present on equal terms and telling the story openly had to come before forgiveness.

In fact, a lack of openness is often harmful. Too often we use confidentiality as an excuse for hiding incompetence or injustice. For the good of the church, real harms need to be known, so that they can be both prevented and forgiven.

Openness and disagreement are okay

Hurting another person is the harm we need to be concerned about. Mere disagreement isn't necessarily harmful. Departing from a traditional practice or disagreeing with the majority about a church doctrine does not actually harm people or threaten the church as a whole. Neither does speaking openly about a conflict. When many people agree, it's all too easy to see the few who disagree as the source of all harm. Yet if we make dissidents into scapegoats, labeling them troublemakers and banishing them, we ourselves harm the church by keeping members from hearing views they actually need to hear.



We too often assume that God's will is being done if everyone is nice, cooperative, a good team player.

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 13 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



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 monetary 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 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

But justice, truth, and real kindness, not just niceness, need to be our aim. Whenever we start to think that getting rid of a few unsettling individuals could resolve all our conflicts, we probably need to listen to exactly those lone voices.



Moving toward healing and forgiveness

Whatever conflict-resolution process we choose to use in our churches, what's most important is that we don't merely sweep the conflict under the rug and act as if it didn't exist. Real healing requires acknowledging conflict and promoting accountabil-

ity. We cannot forgive until we have heard each other out and examined our own role in the conflict.

How might you need to encourage open naming of injustice that's happening in your church congregation, your local community, or the wider world? What steps could you help take toward justice, accountability, and healing? What harm do you need to confess? Who needs to listen to you, and whose stories do you need to hear, before you can celebrate Communion together in a true spirit of forgiveness?

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Becoming the healers we need

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Two kinds of justice

When we talk about justice we too often mean retributive justice, explains Thomas Porter in *Conflict and Communion*. We focus on violation of rules. Our main question is who did it and how they will be punished. Porter finds that this kind of justice isn't even very good at discovering the truth. Its focus on painful consequences for the loser creates defensiveness that provokes half-truths and lies. It's not the justice Jesus advocated.

Restorative justice, by contrast, is based on three main principles.

- It focuses on the harm done to the victims, to the community, and even to the offenders.
- It emphasizes accountability—understanding one's behavior and its results, and taking responsibility for them. It presses the offender to listen, acknowledge the offense, apologize, and make things right as far as possible.
- It creates engagement or dialogue among the parties involved in the harm that was done.

What are we doing in our churches to promote restorative justice, not only in the violent conflicts that are so prevalent in today's world but also in our internal church conflicts?

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ but I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.”
—Matthew 5:38-39