Resolving conflict when no one's in charge

by Carol Bell

The vestry of an Episcopal church votes on a motion about use of the church building. On both sides of the issue, there are strong feelings, but one side carries the majority. Then, those who have won the vote say, "No, we don't want to proceed with this. We don't have consensus yet."

At a diocesan convention, it is impossible to distinguish those who are ordained from those who are not ordained; only the bishop, who is the official presider of the meeting, wears a clerical collar. Even congregational delegations are hard to spot, because there is no formal seating arrangement. Every congregation, regardless of size, has the same number of voting delegates. Ordained persons may or may not have been elected to serve as delegates; there is no voting by orders.

A resident of a small midwestern town asks a friend who is an Episcopalian, "Tell me, who exactly is in charge over there at your church?" The answer, "No one; we all are; all of us are the ministers."

These are snapshots of life in the Diocese of Northern Michigan. For the past 15 years, many of the women and men who make up this small, somewhat isolated, diocese have questioned, debated, changed, and changed again their approach to leadership and to conflict resolution. With the encouragement of our bishop, Thomas K. Ray, a number of congregations have undertaken the difficult task of implementing a circular model of leadership, and that model has had a profound effect upon how these congregations deal with conflict.

Every voice heard

Marion Luckey says of her parish, St. John's, Munising, "Everyone's gift is honored; everyone's voice is heard." In Munising and elsewhere, ministry is neither the job of a stipended priest, nor the full-time vocation of a non-stipended priest ordained under the Canon 9 "local ordination" provision of the Episcopal Church. Ray and others in Northern Michigan would call either of these options a non-circular, hierarchical model of leadership.

Likewise, what happens when decisions are made in Trinity Church, Gladstone, is the antithesis of the top-down model. "Every person's opinion is truly valued," says church member Carol Clark. "We know that not everything can be resolved, and we can live with that. We give each other the freedom to hold different points of view. Because everyone is respected, no one feels he or she has to jockey for position; there's room at the table for all of us."

Clark recalls an occasion when a group of Trinity parishioners tackled an issue that was causing great conflict in the city of Gladstone: the possible construction of a limestone plant. "At Trinity, we chose to have a dialogue about the issue, knowing that it was a very hot topic. Why didn't we avoid such a volatile discussion? Because it was real, because it affected everyone," Carol says. "And it was painful, but we came through it fine. We got our emotions and our opinions out on the table. We knew it wasn't about changing people's opinions; it's always about being honest and respectful of one another."

Mutual ministry

Clark indicates that the high trust level she and others experience at Trinity has come about as the result of 10 years' intentional work on what the diocese terms "mutual ministry." A church that embarks on this program calls a number of people from its midst to form a covenant group. For about three years, the group studies together, learns about one another, faces conflict, and practices shared leadership.

At the end of the preparation period, with the approval of the bishop and Commission on Ministry, the members of that covenant group are commissioned as a ministry support team, with several of their number ordained as priests and deacons. Others are commissioned to roles such as catechist, stewardship coordinator, priestly ministry coordinator and preacher. But the ministry support team does not now become a team that "does the ministry." Rather, the goal of these men and women is to encourage and enable the ministry of the entire congregation.

If this approach sounds chaotic, it's because, to some extent, it is. If it sounds time-consuming and unwieldy, Jack

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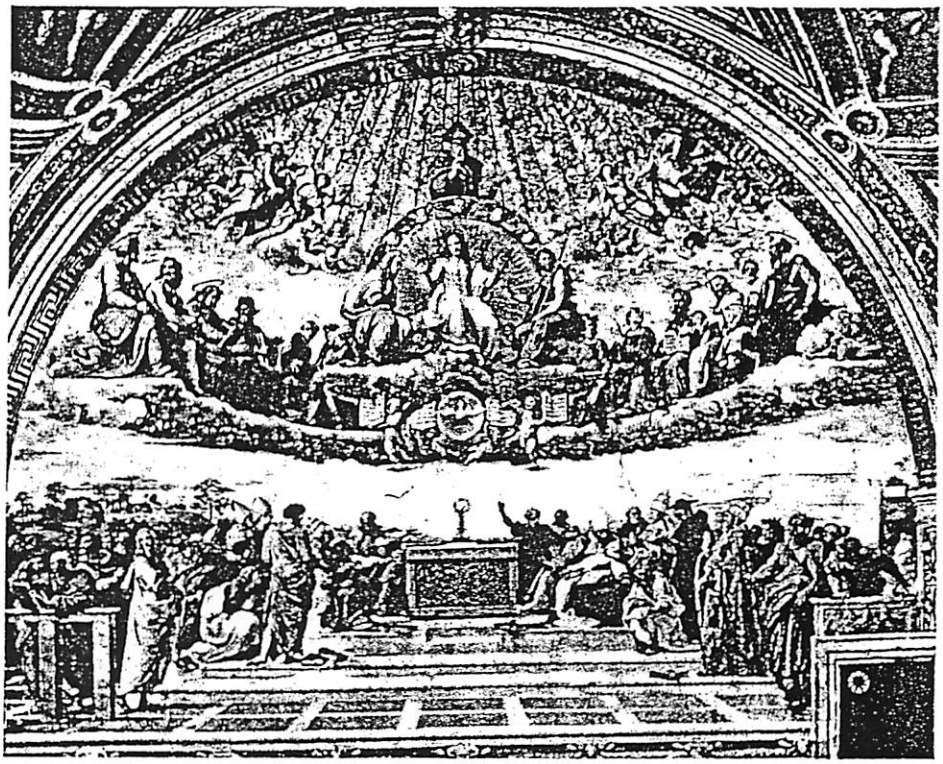
Glascock, a member of the ministry support team at All Saints' Church, Newberry, would agree. "Before we even get to the point of conflict," he says, "we discuss it a long time, and by that, I mean a very long time. Several years ago, our presiders [locally affirmed presbyters] said they would like to have the altar moved out from the back wall; they wanted to face the congregation. It took us a year-and-a-half to two years before anything was moved. We talked about it openly with the entire congregation; everyone's opinion was listened to. One of the [diocesan] missioners, Charlie Piper, came and met with the church for three hours. He gave us some historical background about liturgical space. And when finally we did move the altar, the ministry support team stood ready again to hear people's response, to change our minds. I think, because we took a long time and sought consensus, there was little or no problem; the new arrangement was embraced."

According to Tom Ray, facing conflict in a non-hierarchal structure involves not just patience, but also speaking — and hearing — the truth in love. "It is my experience that the further you ascend in a hierarchy, the less likely you are to hear the truth. When I have a very good idea, I bring it to a group of people and I disclose my emotions and my investment in that idea. Then I marvel at how the idea gets changed, shaped, and improved beyond anything I ever could have devised."

Ray cites an incident that took place when he was rector of St. Luke's Church, Evanston, Ill., as the turning point in his thinking about non-hierarchical decision-making. He had brought a plan to the vestry which received lengthy discussion, but which ended up pretty much the way he, the priest and therefore the authority figure, had hoped it would. Afterwards, a woman commented, "If this is the way we're going to handle things, we don't even have to meet." When Ray became bishop of the Diocese of Northern Michigan, he was determined that no one would feel as this woman did about how the church community makes decisions. He wanted to be ready to hear the truth, to refrain from any and all micromanagement, and to encourage communities of Christians to take adult responsibility for their ministries.



Disputá, 1509, Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican — Raphael

Non-hierarchical diocesan decision-making

Clark says that in Northern Michigan a non-hierarchical model of decision-making and handling of conflict takes place on the diocesan level, as well as on the parish level. "It is the method employed by Diocesan Council, the Episcopal Churchwomen, and the Ministry Development Strategy Team [an advisory group that assists parishes in discovering how best to engage their unique ministries]". Bonnie Turner, of Grace Church, Menominee, who serves on a number of diocesan committees, adds that the strength of a non-hierarchical, collegial model of leadership is shown particularly in reflecting on issues together and benefiting from everyone's insights and points of view.

"It has become the way we do things," she says. "People are empowered to do what they do best."

Not every parish in the diocese uses the leadership-in-a-circle model. Three parishes have a traditional rector, and there are several other communities that have not embraced the mutual ministry program. Turner comments on her experience of the recently formed Discernment Committee, which brings together representatives of every region as the diocese moves toward selection of a bishop to succeed Ray when he retires in 1999.

"We make decisions by consensus and we take turns facilitating," she says. "Subgroups have tasks to do, but no one person is in charge. People from congregations who approach decision-making in a

more top-down way express discomfort; the collegial approach seems chaotic. They indicate they are fearful that the sub-groups will not accomplish their tasks and people won't know what is going on."

More communication, not less

For Ray, decision-making and conflict are best handled with more communication rather than less, with more information, not less. In the diocese there are six seminary-educated persons who work with local congregations as missioners; their job is to consult, to assist, to offer education, to facilitate groups when needed, but never to be in charge. They are companions.

"They are part of the group, not leaders of the group," Clark says. One of the missioners, Manuel Padilla, says, "Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. Differences must be addressed and the process always involves building relationships."

Jim Kelsey, Ministry Development Coordinator for the diocese, has made communication a high priority. With his assistance, dozens of people in the Diocese of Northern Michigan are linked by computer networks. He adds that Roland Allen's insights about the mission field pertain here, too: "Whenever possible, decisions and issues should be discussed openly, in the light of day, with as many of the community gathered as possible. Individuals should not have to grapple with tough decisions. The more input there is from the community, and the more consensus we have, the more prepared the community will be to deal with the conflict that must and will come along."

Parishioners, bishop, and missioners agree that this model of shared leadership requires a great deal of hard work; it involves a lot of pain. Groups have discovered that when they refuse to let decisions be made unilaterally, the immediate result is likely to be ambiguity, unresolved issues.

Practicing on the choice of carpet

Jack Glascock tells of another incident from the life of All Saints', Newberry: New carpet was needed in the nave. Several months ago the debate over what color carpet to install seemed to be polarizing the congregation. Emotions were verbalized, votes were taken. Then the vestry decided the time wasn't yet right to decide.

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— Thomas Ray

"And we still don't have a decision on that. We simply won't go forward until everyone can live with the final choice. No lines are drawn in the sand; rather, we see ever-changing wave-marks that show the ebb and flow of our conversations."

Isn't the color of carpet a not-so-earth-shattering issue?

Glascock agrees. "But what we're doing is practicing. If we can resolve the little things, if we can build community and really listen to each other, then we are likely to be able to deal with the really tough issues. It's good training for us."

Living with ambiguity, speaking the truth in love, disclosing personal agenda and emotional investment, seeing conflict as potentially creative, even bonding — these are the marks of a diocese that daily struggles with great challenges: small numbers, financial difficulties, and geographical isolation. Mutual ministry, at least partially, began as an answer to the question: How can our worshiping communities have a full sacramental life when we are financially unable to hire full-time clergy? According to many of the men and women in the diocese, these practical considerations quickly led to the development of a transforming model of leadership that Carol Clark describes as "exciting, energizing, affirming, and healthy." Jack Glascock says, "This seems to me to fit very well into our Episcopal heritage: praying about the issue, taking time to decide, giving due consideration to different points of view, and — most of all — listening to, and being open to, each other. It may take years to make a decision, but isn't it worth it?"

When justice is the issue

"Worth it, in terms of fostering and maintaining a relatively healthy community, yes," says Martin Bell, missioner in the diocese. "But the thought that we might take years to make decisions about justice issues is not a happy thought; we simply cannot afford to wait years before enacting justice."

Ray references an instance: Diocesan convention in 1996 included a long, open, and honest discussion of whether or not to urge the Standing Liturgical Commission to develop rite(s) for the blessing of committed same-sex unions. "We designed a way to avoid a win-lose situation and have a responsible discussion — but, thereby, we also designed a process by which we were able to avoid taking a stand."

The convention decided not to bring the resolution to a vote. "In issues of conscience, we can't always wait for consensus," Ray points out, "and certainly collegial deliberation does not exonerate the individual." Perhaps in this model of leadership, where conversation is respectful amd compassionate, where diverse viewpoints are welcomed, the individual has a particularly poignant responsibility to call the community to take a stand. TW