


CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

By June Stephenson



“Conflict is inevitable, but combat is optional.”

Max Lucado

17 For God's Kingdom is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of the righteousness, peace, and joy which the Holy Spirit gives. 18 And when you serve Christ in this way, you please God and are approved by others. 19 So then, we must always aim at those things that bring peace and that help strengthen one another. Romans 14: 17-19 Good News Bible

So often we cringe at the thought of conflict, thinking it will be destructive, leading to confrontation and crisis, and changing relationships irreparably. However, Max Lucado (author and pastor) has said "Conflict is inevitable, but combat is optional".

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The Chinese symbol for crisis is made up of two words: wei which means "danger" and ji which means "opportunity". In a situation of conflict, great care is needed because of the risk of creating a disaster, but there is also the potential for action that creates great improvement.

During my University studies, one course was titled "Conflict Transformation", led by Alice and Bob Evans, who are known for their work on the South African peace and reconciliation movement. They encouraged us to consider the huge amount of energy that is consumed by remaining in a state of conflict, and to find ways to transform the energy of that conflict into building peace. Sometimes, when we find ourselves in conflict it can be helpful to consider what are we gaining by remaining in conflict, what are we losing, or do we need to take a different path?

Over the years, our church has faced some serious conflicts. I am so thankful for our World Church leadership and their endeavours to bring us as a body to a greater understanding of what it means to be a people dedicated to the pursuit of peace and conflict resolution. I remember being at the 2000 World Conference, when the recipient of the church's Peace Prize John Paul Lederach spoke about the challenges of bringing about resolution of conflicts. John Paul is a Professor of International Peacebuilding at the University of Notre Dame and has worked extensively in situations of conflict around the world.

Over the years, our church members had engaged in informal discussions on the question of acceptance of baptisms performed in other denominations.¹ After John Paul Lederach addressed the Conference, we adjourned for the lunch break, and we were asked to return to the Conference chamber ready to indicate informally how we might vote on this question.

It was distressing to see that we could not come together. We were a people divided, with about 45% in agreement and 45% opposed and it could have been a disaster if we had proceeded to more formal

consideration of the idea. We had experienced separation and loss previously in 1984 when a revelation was received indicating women would be called to the priesthood, and dissenters chose to permanently leave our church.

Instead of risking a repeat of this kind of pain and separation, the First Presidency called the whole church to enter into a long period of listening and discussion and feedback, both personally and in our congregations over the interconference period. Concerns were expressed, questions were heard, and legislation was formed and adjusted. At the 2010 World Conference, when we came to consider the question of acceptance of baptisms in other denominations, it was approved.

There have been other questions for our church to consider, such as the ordination to priesthood of individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation, plus changes to our marriage rites and other cultural expectations. We have incorporated new processes of listening to each other, informal discussions, feedback surveys and different ways of voting, which have been a blessing to the church. I am so thankful for our church leadership, in calling us to find new ways to be peacemakers.

Another favourite quotation is by American writer Mark Twain, concerning his advice on dealing with adversity, "The rule is perfect: in all matters of opinion our adversaries are insane. When I look around me, I am often troubled to see how many people are mad... This should move us to be charitable towards one another's lunacies."

Now please understand, I know I haven't been perfect when it comes to situations of conflict in my life and I certainly don't have all the answers, but I believe we have the potential to try to find common ground, apologize for the hurt that we have done to others, and try again to seek understanding.

Conflict is inevitable in life! In my time as a minister for the church I have been challenged to find peaceful pathways with people in conflict and have experienced the blessings of shared solutions and the resulting healthy vibrant community. Conversely, I have agonised when conflict has not been resolved successfully and the community becomes weaker.

Christ's peace is the hope and the good news that we can embrace as disciples of Jesus Christ. Let's be charitable towards each other and build the peaceable kingdom together.

References:

Lucado, Max: "When God Whispers Your Name"

Twain, Mark: illustrations@MINISTERSMAIL.COM email 29th June 2005

Kraybill, Ronald, Evans, Alice and Evans, Robert: "Peace Skills"

1. Since the establishment of our church, legislation required new members to be baptised and confirmed, even if they had already been baptised in another denomination.