

## Difficult Conversations

### Introduction:

Pastor Jane is looking for a second call and she receives the paperwork of a rural congregation, one that includes generations of the same families. As she reads through their paperwork, she reached the section of the MSP that asks, “Describe a time of conflict in the history of your congregation and what you learned from the experience.” The congregation in question had filled out that section with only two sentences. “We have never had a conflict as a congregation. We all get along and are just as close as family.” Pastor Jane immediately turns the paperwork back in to the synod office and says that she isn’t interested in interviewing with them. Why? What do you think was Pastor Jane’s reasoning behind that action?

PART I: Acts 15- the very first church council meeting (end of document)

PART II: Analyzing Disagreements

- A) Interpersonal Conflict- Personalities who struggle to understand and respect one another
  - B) Local current events/issues- school merger, grain elevator closes, a rise in local crime, local scandal hits the newspapers
  - C) Disagreement in discernment- factions in the congregation who don’t agree on the direction in which ministry should go (daycare in church, NA meets in parish hall, buying new carpet, Cross-generational education rather than old Sunday School)
  - D) Moral/ethical/cultural quandaries: Gun regulation, human sexuality, immigration, domestic abuse, mental health, racism
- First gut reaction is usually to retreat, minimize, and ignore. But this only results in a negative peace, which is not wholesome or healthy Example: Marriage
  - What happens when we embrace difficult conversations? We leave room for the Holy Spirit to work transformation on the individuals and the community.
  - But doing difficult conversations well is a skill that requires exercise, like a muscle. If we avoid practicing now we risk a big blowout argument in the future.

PART III: Practicum

## Healthy practices in Conversation

- 1 No soapbox
- 2 respectful dialog
- 3 listening carefully
- 4 Extend grace
- 5 Posture of humility
- 6 Work for consensus

## Unhealthy Practices in Conversation

1. Soapbox of righteousness
2. Ranting, monolog
3. Not listening
4. Suspect motives of the other
5. Try to dominate or manipulate the other
6. Refuse to work for consensus

As a council, consider investigating the following:

- 1) Covenant of discourse- mutual expectations of conduct
- 2) are there leaders in the congregation with gifts of mediation who could host roundtable discussions?
- 3) Are there people in the congregation who would be interested in doing this type of ministry?
- 4) Research training tools (ex. Difficult Conversations by Katie Day; Lombard Institute)
- 5) Consider how youth might lead the way
- 6) Consider a change in venue (Theology on Tap at local bar)
- 7) A few starting topics might be the ELCA Social Statements. Make sure to use the provided study guides.

## PART IV: Case Studies

- 1) Local argument
  - In Bestville Nebraska, population 400, most of the people are connected to family farms that have been handed down throughout the generations since 1870. But now a large company is proposing a new oil pipeline that would cut across their community. Some are in favor of the new pipeline, arguing that this will bring new workers to the area. Others are very opposed, especially those who would have to sell their land in order to make the pipeline possible. Now the atmosphere in town is tense, which includes life at the Lutheran church. How might the pastor and church council respond to this local issue?
- 2) Disagreement on Ministry
  - For the past thirty years the women of St. Mark Lutheran Church in NiceTown Nebraska have always met 6 times a year at 9am on Mondays in order to sew quilts to give to organizations like Lutheran World Relief. But the ladies have gotten older, some of them have passed away, and now only five are able to continue with the ministry. Amy is 35 years old and has recently moved back to her hometown from the city. She has asked the quilting ladies if they would please change their meeting time so that she and other young adults can join them. She is also asking the quilting ladies to

please teach the younger ones their skills. But the quilting ladies are having a hard time saying yes to Amy's idea. How can the church council help with this transition?

### 3) Social issue

- In Progress Center Nebraska, a new beef processing plant has opened and there are new workers arriving in town, many of them immigrants there with a work visa. With new languages being spoken in the streets and stores, the members of St. Luke Lutheran Church are wondering if they should be inviting these newcomers to worship. But how? But then the newspaper headline breaks that an ICE agent has detained a family. Should the council encourage the church members to talk about these issues? What resources do they need to research?

## Acts 15

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses."

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, 'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord— even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago.' Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should

write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.”

Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.” So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. After they had been there for some time, they were sent off in peace by the believers to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, and there, with many others, they taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord.

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- 1) Acts 15 is the story of the first church council meeting. What is being debated?
- 2) What do you think the arguments against Peter and Paul and Barnabas’ testimony might have been about?
- 3) What are the steps that the church council in Acts 15 takes in order to make a decision?
- 4) The decision the church council takes is a difficult and radical change. What opposition do you think followed this decision? If you’re not sure, consult Paul’s argument with the church in Galatia in Galatians chapter 1 and 2.
- 5) What lessons from these stories in Scripture can you as a council member take with you to your own home congregation?