

Welcome and Reminders

Welcome to any visitors and welcome back to the group members. It is important to remember that everything said and done in this group is confidential. The expectation is that there will not be discussion about our conversations to anyone outside of the group that is represented here and now. We understand that sometimes personal insights or information may be shared by someone who feels comfortable doing so in this group and not around others. Let's be respectful of that and carry our commitment to confidentiality as we leave this group. *(Pass out the confidentiality reminder to anyone who has not yet received one).*

Prayer and Praises

Introduction

Whether we are a critic or a lover of the church—or for some of us, both—it's important to remain balanced. Let's acknowledge that there are both kinds of churches in the world today: good and bad. Strong and weak. There are some Communities of Faith that ought to be cloned and some that should not. There is a saying if the horse is dead dismount.

I hope that we can focus on being healthy and strong, faithful and loving, liberating and full of grace.

If being a healthy church means having critics or conflict some people don't want to have any part of it. But in any organization there is conflict and healthy ways to deal with it.

If you were to read the book of Acts you would see in chapter two that the Holy Spirit came upon the people and the church added significant numbers during that time. There are stories of healing and imprisonment for sharing the gospel. There are stories of people sharing what they have with one another. There is a story of Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira who tried to cheat God (It didn't end so well for them).

In chapter 6 there is a great illustration of how a congregation that faced crisis remains healthy. This church was Christ-honoring and produced great fruit as a result. I want to use these few principles to see how to deal they dealt with problems and how we might use that as a springboard.

1. They Understood they would have problems

As a growing church there will be aches and pains. It is just like growing up in many aspects. For the people in Acts God sent miracles, new believers were arriving daily, and a sense of contentment settled in upon the leadership. Then from inside the family, a groan went up. Then it swelled into a chorus of complaints. In the distribution of food for the congregation, the widows received priority. But for some reason, Hebrew widows were getting a bigger share and there was neglect of the Grecian widows. Did someone there say, "Oh no! We have a problem! What are we doing wrong?" Did they panic? Did anyone jump ship because the presence of a problem must indicate they were failing God? It doesn't seem to be the case!

Churches will have occasional issues. It can be like a growing child, a lively family, or a thriving business; challenges arise when something is growing. And those issues will have to be dealt with. Not only is it that not a bad thing, it could be an indication you're doing something right.

2. They handled criticism well

The healthiest family will run into a problem from time to time that results in unhappy campers needing to speak up. People who gripe do not think of what they are doing as undercutting their leadership and demoralizing the troops. They are just registering their displeasure at the way something is being done in the church. There is, of course, a healthy way to complain, and there is a type of complaining that is like a cancer in its deadliness, a knife in the cuts and wounds it inflicts, and a slap in the face for the abrupt wake-up it administers.

I have learned over the years that there are some people that will fight you at every turn. There will be naysayers who put the brakes on. Those kinds of people have a purpose too. Many years ago there was someone who had a position in the church and others criticized me for not removing this person. (They eventually left the church because they had their own agenda which was not for the good of the church) Sometimes unfair criticism can perform a useful function. Others hear it and do not want to be associated with that position. They shrink away from the naysayer and rush to the support and defense of their leaders.

A wise leader will not panic when he learns someone is criticizing. "Consider the source" is always good advice. The "fix-it" mindset in me wants to say that if we incorporate positive places within the church for people to share freely and constructively we can eliminate most issues. Then we will not have the murmuring and bellyaching which drive the leadership nuts.

3. They dealt with problems promptly

One of the differences in healthy and sick bodies is in their promptness in responding to an infection. Some critics can be left alone safely, since the body has walled them off and they will do no harm—and can actually do some good indirectly. Most problems that arise, however, should be dealt with by specific action. A healthy church will either already have a way to deal with problems, criticism, and trouble-makers, or it will find a method quickly when the need arises. With the development of our Covenant we are better able to address the concerns.

If there is an issue that needs to be corrected then we must strive to work on the solution. There may be things that have been overlooked or someone has not thought about and therefore those kinds of things will need to be addressed.

4. They depended on their lay leadership

Acts 6:3-4 The twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said...“Seek out from among you seven who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”...” Pastors and Leadership do not have to handle every issue themselves. In an unhealthy church, they may have to. “That’s what we pay them for,” I can hear someone saying. But the reality is most do not pray for the pastor, or leaders.

Some ministers are unable to turn over jobs and feel their authority is being undercut if they ask someone else to do anything. This is not authority but a sickness. God does not send pastoral servants to do everything themselves, but to assist others in finding their spiritual gifts, their calling, their place of service. Problems that arise can provide ideal opportunities for such ministry.

I always loved it when my pastor would say to me, “Terri, such-and-such has arisen and we need to jump on this. Can you get with the leaders in that department and deal with this?” Absolutely. The leader is doing what they should do—find the right person and delegate the responsibility. I then was able to write in my report and share what we did and how the problem was resolved.

5. The pastoral leadership stayed with its divinely-given priorities

Acts 6:2, 4. “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables... We will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

In a healthy body, the head (not the divine “Head,” but the overseer—*episcopos*) does not stop its activity of receiving information, of thinking and studying, or of learning and analyzing in order to pull another part of the body out of trouble. It stays with its priorities. After all, some other part of the body—an arm, a hand, fingers—is better equipped for rescue work than the head.

To find balance pastors and leaders must have priorities and stick with them otherwise we will meet ourselves coming and going. This is not healthy and sure way to burn out.

6. The congregation chose good and godly leaders

Acts 6:3. “...seven people of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom...”

Nothing speaks to the health of a church like the quality of the people it chooses as its leaders. Choosing people because they are popular is not the way to choose. Leaders are to people of the Word, people of Prayer, not necessarily the most popular. In a typical church, the people will know who the godly women and men are and who does not qualify. My point is very simple: It cannot be about popularity!

7. The congregation supported their leaders and trusted them to do the job

Once good leaders are chosen, the congregation ought to support the work they have been called to do. Invariably, they’ll come in for criticism at some point—it’s the nature of the leadership beast—and will need two things: their pastor to be in support of them and the congregation to reaffirm their trust. Even when we do not agree with a decision our leaders have made, affirming that they did their best is still wise. The injunction of Ephesians 5:21 to “submit to one another” has to mean something: Even when we disagree with each other, we are still going to be supportive.

The church which insists on making every decision, great or small, in its monthly business meeting is sentencing itself to dwarfism and its leadership to misery. This is one element in what Ken Hemphill has called “the bonsai theory of church growth”

8. Solutions modeled Christ-likeness

Acts 6:5–6. And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles. The seven chosen all had Greek

names which may imply they were all Hellenist. It seems to me the church decided to appoint these people in response to the imbalance with the Hellenistic widows. The church chose them for the very purpose to fulfill the need and to even it out.

Can we use this illustration? Yes! The next time a group of people in our church feel neglected we can ask; what would happen if a representative of that group was put in charge of the work. Of course there need to be the realization that the group must be mature and godly; otherwise it's a disaster in the making.

9. Problems were dealt with so well that the world was impressed

Acts 6:7. Then the word spread and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Others in the area and the world are watching. How do we act when there is an issue? Do you hold your breath waiting for the next shoe to drop? This would tell the tale on the Christians. Would they panic and self-destruct? Would the leadership impose a cult-like oppressive rule over the membership? Or would they handle this legitimate issue in the love which the messages; and studies?

They got it right. They did it so well that the outside world—lay and priest alike—said, “We like what we see. We want what you have.” No problem which results in this kind of harvest is bad. Any problem which causes the church's leadership to forget who they are (and Whose they are) and to adopt the world's way of problem-solving is no friend.

10. Good things happened

Whenever God's people do the hard thing in Gods way—when we love the unlovely, when we forgive our attackers, when we love our enemy, when we soldier on in the face of adversity, when we maintain our joy in the midst of disaster and retaliate with love—

- God is glorified.
- Jesus is pleased.
- The Holy Spirit is freed to equip the Saints with a plan
- The devil is infuriated. This is not going according to plan.
- The enemies are puzzled. You are behaving differently from what they had expected.
- The critics of the church are silenced.
- The church itself is edified and strengthened.
- Church members going through hard times are encouraged and instructed.
- Outsiders are impressed and want some of what they see in you.
- You yourself are blessed.
- Your reward in Heaven is great (Luke 6:35a).
- Your reputation goes through the roof (Luke 6:35b).
- Anything that can achieve all of this in one motion has to be considered a blessing indeed!

Most of us have learned to look behind us and thank God for what appeared an insoluble problem but which God turned into a major blessing. The trick is to give thanks in advance,

the moment the problem arises. After all, experience has now taught you that these are opportunities for God to do something special.

In Chapter 7 we read about Stephen and his speech to the Sanhedrin
Acts 7:51 “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him — 53 you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

What did they do?

Acts 7:54-60 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Humanity standing at the right hand of God.” At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep. (he died)

Forgiven them they know not what they do!