

The Slippery Slope of Conflict

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To some, conflict is a hazard that threatens to sweep them off their feet and leave them bruised and hurting. To others, it is an obstacle that they should conquer quickly and firmly, regardless of the consequences. But some people have learned that conflict is an opportunity to solve common problems in a way that honors God and offers benefits to those involved.

--Ken Sande. *The Peacemaker, A Biblical Guide to Conflict*

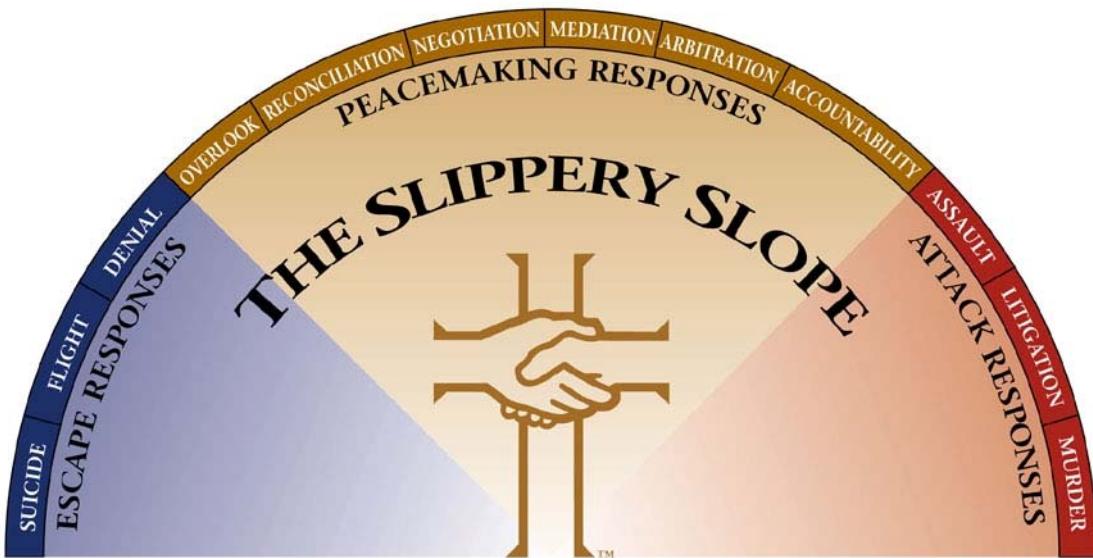
Conflict is not always a negative thing. If framed correctly and dealt with in a healthy way, conflict can become an occasion for God to do amazing things in us and through us to glorify His name in all the earth. The inner-Anglican/Episcopal conflict within which we live has the potential to bring out the very worst in human nature; indeed, in many cases it has done that very thing. I would like to advocate that it also has the potential to bring out our very best, the *Imago Deo* in us.

As a member of the Diocesan Board and recent member of the Standing Committee of the Diocese of Central Florida, I have been asked by one of my clergy colleagues within our diocese whether our Diocesan Board and Standing Committee have exhibited “schismatic” behavior in our stands and statements over these past several years. To be certain our Bishop and Diocesan councils have made very clear statements. However, the charge of schism is a serious one to be wrestled with in good faith and prayer. My clergy colleague wrote to me:

We must find a way, and lead others in finding a way, to forgive our own pasts, all of our pasts, and to move on toward community. Schism of any kind is not the direction....And we must let the public know that this is where our heart is...not in schism.

I have personally and prayerfully wrestled with his words this past Holy Week. Have our Diocese’s actions or statements been schismatic? Have my actions or statements been schismatic?

In my wrestling and self-examination, I personally have returned to the categories offered in Ken Sande's book, *The Peacemaker*. I use his extremely helpful graphic, "The Slippery Slope of Conflict" to evaluate both my responses and the responses of others in this conflict with which we are now and have been embroiled. I offer it to us all with permission¹ to be utilized as a tool to evaluate our past, present and future responses:



The first step needed with this model is to acknowledge that *we are in a conflict*. This conflict has been caused by and led to broken vows and violations of our mutually held bonds of affection. All Anglicans and Episcopalians are involved in it to one degree or another. This means all of us are slip-sliding somewhere on the slippery slope of conflict. To bring our language together, I locate the Escape/Attack responses as those responses which my colleague priest quoted above is referring to as "schism".

Flight: This is a schismatic response that is often met by an equal and opposite schismatic reaction, **Litigation**. We have seen this action/reaction repeated all over our country, as individuals and congregations have simply fled the conflict. I do have sympathy for those who for their own sense of call, self preservation, personal peace, health and sanity have had to leave the church. For whatever the reason, it is a tragic outcome. However, flight may simply delay the inevitability of having to truly face the problem. Jesus entrusted us with the ministry and message of reconciliation as highlighted in 1 Cor. 5:18-20. This ministry of reconciliation breaks down when we flee,

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and it breaks down when we litigate against one another in civil courts. “The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?” (1 Cor. 6:7)

Denial of the gravity of the problems and/or of the conflict itself is an inappropriate escape response. “One way to escape from a conflict is to pretend that it does not exist. Or, if we cannot deny that the problem exists, we simply refuse to do what should be done to resolve a conflict properly. These responses bring only temporary relief and usually make matters worse (see Gen. 16:1–6; 1 Sam. 2:22–25).”²

We may not look at it this way, but denial is a subtle form of “schism”. I fear that many among us are advocates of this response. Denial can bring a peace of sorts but it is a false peace. I have noticed that denial is usually met with a verbal **Assault** response, which is also schismatic. (This has often been my error, for which I have sought forgiveness. Denial usually sends me over the edge!) When we sin in our anger by verbally assaulting one another we give the Devil a foothold to divide and conquer us. We would all profit from reflecting upon Paul’s counsel in Ephesians 4:25-32 on the importance of guarding our attitudes and speech.

Overlook: Can we just "overlook" all this? Overlooking these matters *would be* a possible peacemaking response. It is a good and healthy response in many matters; it is a particularly helpful response in matters about which we can agree are not worth breaking fellowship over such as: liturgical practice, high and low church, contemporary and traditional music.

Some among us advocate allowing the sexuality matters to be overlooked, to which the reply is often a call for accountability. The issues of Marriage and Human Sexuality, Authority of the Scriptures, etc. all have serious consequences to our society, the Church and to many individuals and families in our care. The issues with which we are struggling are not in the category of adiaphorous (something neutral that can be "overlooked"). Bishop James Stanton's, *A word about the House of Bishops' resolutions, March 24, 2007* reminds the leadership in the Episcopal Church of our own commitments made and now broken. He quotes where General Convention itself recognized that these matters are not adiaphorous when it said in 1991:

"Resolved, the house of Deputies concurring, That this Church receive the report of the Standing Committee on Human Affairs as clear evidence of no strong consensus in the Church on the human sexuality issues considered or the resolutions proposed; and be it further

"Resolved, That the Office of the Presiding Bishop now be directed to propose to all the provinces of the Anglican Communion and all churches with whom we are in ecumenical dialogue that a broad process of consultation be initiated on an official pan-Anglican and ecumenical level as a bold step forward in the consideration of these potentially divisive issues which should not be resolved by

² Sande, *The Peacemaker*, pg. 23.

the Episcopal Church on its own" (Journal of the General Convention, 1991: pp. 210 – 211, 807-808).

These “potentially divisive issues” have been determined by the Communion to be matters which will break the bonds of affection at “the deepest levels”. They are matters which signify “walking apart” from catholic vows and commitments. For all of these reasons add to that the damage done to those of homosexual orientation and their families by NOT addressing their particular challenges with a grace and truth-filled pastoral response. For all of these reasons, we simply cannot live and let live, we cannot simply overlook. When we overlook inappropriately, are we not refusing to do what needs to be done to resolve the conflict properly? Is not the overlooking of something which should not be overlooked, really a form of denial?

So where does that leave us on the Slippery Slope of Conflict? I see us at **Arbitration**. The **Reconciliation, Negotiation and Mediation responses** have all been attempted and subsequently broken down to the dismay of many of us. Efforts were certainly made by all sides for many years, but especially these last several years. The Windsor Process has been an excellent attempt at **Mediation** to lead back toward **Reconciliation**. I see the Communion as having tackled all three of these peacemaking responses in good faith. Our Diocese of Central Florida has remained committed to this Windsor process toward reconciliation. When the report first came out, I have to admit that I thought it was not severe enough. I now look back on it as The Anglican Communion’s attempt to “restore us gently” back into the family. (See Galatians 6:1)

The Arbitration response: The Communiqué is our Communion’s "arbitration" in our conflict. The Primates Meeting is in fact the only globally accepted arbitrator available to in our polity as constituent members of the Anglican Communion for “cases of exceptional emergency which are incapable of internal resolution within our province.” The Communion has given to the Primates this “collegial role” by Lambeth Conference 1998 Resolution III.⁶³

³ (1998 Lambeth III.6) On the Instruments of the Anglican Communion: This Conference, noting the need to strengthen mutual accountability and interdependence among the Provinces of the Anglican Communion,

- a. reaffirms Resolution 18.2(a) of Lambeth 1988 which "urges that encouragement be given to a developing collegial role for the Primates' Meeting under the presidency of the Archbishop of Canterbury, so that the Primates' Meeting is able to exercise an enhanced responsibility in offering guidance on doctrinal, moral and pastoral matters";
- b. asks that the Primates' Meeting, under the presidency of the Archbishop of Canterbury, include among its responsibilities positive encouragement to mission, intervention in cases of exceptional emergency which are incapable of internal resolution within provinces, and giving of guidelines on the limits of Anglican diversity in submission to the sovereign authority of Holy Scripture and in loyalty to our Anglican tradition and formularies;
- c. recommends that these responsibilities should be exercised in sensitive consultation with the relevant provinces and with the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) or in cases of emergency the Executive of the ACC and that, while not interfering with the juridical authority of the provinces, the exercise of these responsibilities by the Primates' Meeting should carry moral authority calling for ready acceptance throughout the Communion....

The Standing Committee of the Diocese of Central Florida recently issued a statement that advocates the “ready acceptance” of the Primate’s arbitration ruling and expresses great disappointment with the House of Bishops unwillingness to do so.⁴ Arbitration is a peacemaking response. In order for it to work, however, all sides involved in the conflict must *readily accept* the arbitration.

In my mind, the Episcopal Bishops who are committed to the preservation of the Anglican Communion and The Episcopal Church’s continued membership therein need to verbally communicate acceptance and willingness to move forward with the implementation of the Pastoral Scheme and Schedule called for in the Primate’s Communiqué. Such implementation (to the highest degree possible) might just be the strong medicine needed to move our conflict to a healthier place and avoid the next response: Accountability.

Accountability Phase: If the unified resolve of the Focus and Instruments of Communion and of the Communion "faithful"⁵ within TEC holds, the accountability phase will be next. The House of Bishop’s response to the communiqué seems to be a rejection of our globally accepted arbitrator simply because we do not like the arbitration offered. They have resolved to set the General Convention up as the sole “arbitrator”. This represents a changing of the rules as the game is going on. And, a costly mistake; *the General Convention was the very council whose actions and inactions in two consecutive sessions that resulted in the Windsor/ Communiqué process in the first place.*

The Episcopal Church’s Bishops seem to be counting the costs of whether they can bear up under future accountability offered by the Communion sans repentance, provided that accountability is forthcoming. They are questioning and wondering whether the Communion has the resolve to carry through with any type of accountability. A frank and open meeting between the House of Bishops and the Archbishop of Canterbury will be clarifying in this regard.

All of this could have been avoided by simple submission on House of Bishop’s part to the arbitration ruling offered in the Communiqué. Accountability will come at great cost to all involved, particularly if it is resisted. The final appeal by the Communion "faithful"⁵ must be to accountability for the sake their own continued health and place within the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, and simply because it is the right thing to do.

⁴ See <http://www.cfdioocese.org/news/news07/03hobreax.htm>

⁵ 2007 Primate’s Meeting Communiqué, Paragraph 25. It is also clear that a significant number of bishops, clergy and lay people in The Episcopal Church are committed to the proposals of the Windsor Report and the standard of teaching presupposed in it (cf paragraph 11). These *faithful* people feel great pain at what they perceive to be the failure of The Episcopal Church to adopt the Windsor proposals in full. They desire to find a way to remain in *faithful* fellowship with the Anglican Communion. They believe that they should have the liberty to practice and live by that expression of Anglican faith which they believe to be true. We are deeply concerned that so great has been the estrangement between some of the *faithful* and The Episcopal Church that this has led to recrimination, hostility and even to disputes in the civil courts.

As I look at the peacemaking responses, I see that those of us on the Windsor-supporting side of the Diocese of Central Florida have by and large stayed within the peacemaking responses with occasional lapses into either "denial" or verbal "assault". I will admit that I have been guilty of both, and I personally commit to forsake such responses. There are also those who have pursued the path of "flight" and sadly they are no longer with us. I have read of a priest who has committed "suicide" over these matters—though thankfully none have done so in this diocese. I note the schism of litigation in other dioceses and ecclesiastical "assault" and "murder" (thankfully not physically).

Our Diocese has chosen to be one of the Dioceses that have appealed to the larger Communion for arbitration and accountability in these matters. It is important for us to be honest and own up to the fact that we are in conflict with our own province and that we have sought godly resolution through peacemaking responses. We are not united within our Diocese in that assessment and appeal. Some among us are supportive of the Episcopal Church's new direction and opposed to the Anglican Communion's intervention. Others feel that it is possible to "overlook" these matters. Nevertheless, acknowledging those two dissenting positions, the Bishop and councils of the Diocese of Central Florida have set a course of pursuing godly accountability to the faith we received through peacemaking responses rather than schismatic responses. We have not done it perfectly or without our own sin by any means. We all need forgiveness from one another and from God.

Forgiveness and reconciliation in relationships does not mean that I get to believe whatever I want and behave however I want, and you have to deal with it. Real Christian unity is in both Spirit and Truth. In John 17, it is written that Jesus prayed that we would be One, he also prayed that we would be sanctified in the Truth. He defined the Truth as God's Word. Unity in the Truth is founded on mutually held commitments to Christ and his Word and to one another. It is based in mutual submission to God first and then to one another second—powerful bonds of affection.

Accountability to our commonly held vows and commitments is a duty and responsibility that we all share. When one member of the body is amiss, it is our responsibility in Christ to call them back to faithfulness by the Word to the Body. If they will not come, that is not our fault, but we are duty bound to try. We cannot separate from them until we have pursued the full course of peacemaking responses all the way to accountability. Even if we do have to part fellowship, we still never give up on the hope for restoration and return. We must always hold out hope for the family reunion most exemplified by the parable of the Prodigal Son found in Luke 15. This is not schismatic, but unity in the truth.

Jesus gave us a model for church discipline that included expulsion (See Matt. 18:15-20). However, there was a process that he encouraged that lead to such a severe step in accountability. The fulfillment of Jesus' entire process must precede any broken fellowship or expulsion. Even if such an expulsion takes place, it must always have as its aim, desire and prayer, repentance and restoration back to full fellowship. The Windsor

report hinted at this eventuality and the Communiqué is signaling that we are very close to this final step of accountability. The preliminary response of the House of Bishop is a devastating blow to our common life as an Episcopal Church.

Is it schismatic for the Communion to offer the type of accountability to our province outlined in the Communiqué? I do not think so. Is it schismatic for this Diocese and others like it to seek such accountability of ourselves and our province? Would we say that of a concerned and frustrated family member's intervention with a loved one's addiction? Accountability is both loving and healthy when done in the right way and in the right order.

The Episcopal Church is stuck in an addiction. Just as with any addiction, the entire family system becomes sick with it. Health will come in resolving conflict in a healthy way. Again, I cannot say that our Diocese has done this perfectly or without sin, but I do think we are seeking accountability in the right way and in the right order.

I want to hold up this model of Peacemaking Responses as a one which may be helpful for all involved in our days to come. As the "unknowns" become "knowns" through this year when the Bishops and Archbishops gather in their various councils, and as we gather in response, new sources of conflict will no doubt arise, and God willing faithful resolutions will as well. May we all eschew the schismatic escape and attack responses. Let us pursue peace and godliness through the peacemaking responses. These are not easy times; that is for sure! However, we live in important times. These are important matters. We owe God our very best, and we owe one another the continual commitment of agape love.

The Communion is offering to us the gift of loving accountability with a call and invitation to return to the family. As my priest colleague wrote to me: *Schism of any kind is not the direction....And we must let the public know that this is where our heart is...not in schism.* Time is so short and precious. I, we need to pray more.