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## Churches as Public Peacemakers

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## **Introduction**

Whenever humans gather they sooner or later disagree. This is true in marriages, workplaces, churches, and within and among nations. It is also true in the communities surrounding churches.

Every now and then something from outside the church walls disturbs the harmony we feel inside. People out in the streets raise their voices in contention and anger. The jangle of discord drifts through the stained glass and jars our worship. Our first urge may be to go to the door and nicely ask the neighbors to pipe down. Or we might feel like adding our own voice to those shouting outside. Maybe we will stand at the door and pray that no one out there gets hurt. Or maybe we will close the window and try to ignore the ruckus.

What should Christians do when they see the community around them in an uproar? Is it our place to speak in public disputes? Should we stay out of them, maybe out of respect for the distinctions between church and state? Are there other roles we can play, somewhere between manning the barricades or hiding behind our walls?

In this paper we will explore answers to these questions. We will examine four possible approaches congregations can take to public conflicts. We will identify three theological propositions that, in combination with current theories of conflict resolution, suggest unique roles Christians might play in public conflict. And we will conclude with a suggestion for how Christians might go about being more effective peacemakers in public disputes.

## **I. Four possible Christian approaches to tough public conflicts**

For the purposes of this paper, we will define “public conflicts” as those that either engage broad sectors of a secular community, or are controversial in governmental polities, or both. This includes both the loud, current fights that get news coverage -- from local opposition to the siting of a controversial public facility to national “hot” issues like gay marriage or gun control – as well as longer-term systemic issues that may not be getting much overt attention at the moment, such as Native American rights or the proper balance between retribution and rehabilitation in corrections policies.

We will not spend any time in this paper discussing issues that mostly involve disputes among Christians, over doctrines or budgets or polity structures. Nor are we centrally interested in doctrines that pit believers against the secular world around them, although in many of the issues we’ll consider believers may tend to gravitate toward one side or another in the secular debate.

Instead, we are exploring what Christians might do when they observe people in surrounding communities locked in significant conflict over public issues.

## **A. Silence**

One common response churches make to tough public issues is silence. The silent church does nothing about public issues, and says nothing. On some particularly prominent social issues – the death penalty, perhaps, or abortion – there may be a denominational position tucked away somewhere in a charter. But in a silent church, any voices reading those statements cannot be heard outside the walls of the church.

Churches have reasons for being quiet in public debates. For example, churches focused on the spiritual issues of their members, and on evangelizing the lost, may not pay much attention to secular issues outside their field of vision. Who in the church would want to spend time or energy on issues of taxation, land use, environmental protection, trade policy, bioengineering, and the like? What have they to do with the work of the Kingdom – with worship and discipleship and evangelism?

Even if one of these topics did have an impact on the central work of the church, trying to weigh into the public debate would be a major distraction. It takes time and money to build up enough expertise to be able to contribute meaningfully to the discussion of some of these topics, laden as they are with arcane economic, sociological, political and scientific ramifications. Churches may decide they can't afford to get up to speed.

For some, speaking out on public issues, even as a fully informed and prepared citizen, carries the church into spheres where it doesn't belong. Let the church take care of things spiritual, they say, and let governments and political parties and interest groups work out things secular. "We will tend to the City of God and leave to others the management of the City of Man," they may say. "Separation of Church and State!" they may recite. "If we stay out of secular affairs, the secular is more likely to stay out of our affairs," they may argue.

Churches stay quiet sometimes to avoid giving offense. A denomination convinced that war is evil may mute its criticisms of an international military adventure because it doesn't want to give the impression it is unpatriotic. A group convinced of the sinfulness of homosexuality may keep mum for fear of being seen as harsh, bigoted, or unaccepting. These congregations are keen to keep open channels of communicating the Gospel to as many as possible, and don't want a mere political issue to create for them barriers to being heard on spiritual matters.

It is also possible to offend members of one's own congregation. Imagine how a proud military veteran, perhaps bearing wounds from her service to her country, might feel if her church loudly denounces killing in wars as a sin. Or a lumberjack striving manfully to stay awake on a Sunday morning after working overtime in the woods – what if his pastor gave a sermon about protecting old growth forests as the right way to exercise Christian stewardship? Certainly it is unfortunate if members of the congregation feel they are branded as "non-Christian" and somehow outside redemption. So a kind pastor or elder may have a legitimate reason to perhaps find another topic for this week's sermon.

More than one denomination has been forged in the heat of angry division over a public statement on a pressing public issue. If the scarred veterans, or the industrious lumberjacks, are representative of large fractions of the membership, their discomfort about a leadership position on an issue may build on the discomfort of others like them. Offense becomes division, and denominations endure bitter splits. Is it worth risking such ugly divisions, with all the damage they do to the witness of Christ, over the temptation to pontificate on a social issue (which might be outside the church's jurisdiction anyway)?

And for what? In a nation of hundreds of millions, increasingly linked to a world of billions, what good will it do for a few Christian voices to be added to the cacophony shrilly debating trade or abortion? So little to gain, so much to lose, so little time, so many other things to be done for the Kingdom – it is little wonder that the church might stay quietly on the sidelines as major public issues work themselves out.

### **B. Stridency**

And yet, some church bodies do chime in when public issues arise. Perhaps they do not think of the reasons for being quiet. Or maybe they believe that the teachings of their faith are too important to be kept “under a bushel” when important issues are being decided.

Christian activism is often based profoundly on conviction. Believers aspire to make their faith the core of their life, to be wholly disciples of the living Christ. Whatever Christ commands, they yearn to grow to the point where they will obey, regardless of the cost. And if Christ speaks clearly on a public issue, their discipleship requires them to carry that part of the Message, as avidly as any other part, to the ears of those who need to hear it.

Many of these public prophets wish they were free of what they see as their duty to bear witness on public issues. They'd rather be home with their children, or spending time on their gardens, their careers, or their other vocation, but when they sense God's calling they want to obey. So out they go, perhaps into environments they find distinctively uncomfortable or even positively hostile.

Public prophets, motivated by conviction, may deliver a simple message. Observers see the simplicity of the message and find it strident and judgmental. People carrying a message because they feel God has commanded them to do it aren't necessarily going to display a lot of flexibility or open-mindedness. They may not feel they have the authority to negotiate about God's truth, even if they are inclined to cut deals to accommodate others' needs or get back to their private lives.

Given that their sense of the truth about an issue drives so many Christian public prophets, getting the proper outcome can dominate their tactical decisions. Stridency and

firmness help to forestall easy cop-outs. Alliances come easily with others, not confined to fellow-believers, who share views on key issues (even if they disagree about other things). There are few in American public life more partisan than Christian believers who have decided that the Republican or the Democratic Party is their vehicle to achieving policy goals that are crucial for the Kingdom.

With stridency or partisanship comes polarization. Zealous Christians, like their non-believing allies, can lose sight of the humanity of their foes. Opponents get dehumanized, which makes one's own zeal easier to maintain. If a member of an opposing party is caught in a scandal, why, it is only a symptom of a malady that really affects everyone in the opposition.

### **C. Pacification**

There have been cases where churches have taken seriously the call to be peacemakers, and have seen that call to apply even in public issues. In fact, this paper will argue that this is the proper way to view the role of the church. However, it is possible to take this call in a direction different than I will be proposing, and to see it as a call to pacification.

By “pacification” I mean the attempt to suspend conflict, to keep people from arguing with, confronting, or contesting with each other. This view of peace is essentially “irenic”, from the ancient Greek word often translated as peace.<sup>1</sup> It emphasizes the absence of strife or conflict. Irenic peace comes when enemies lay down arms, when litigants quit suing each other, when kids each keep to their own half of the back seat and quit squabbling!

Irenic peace is a good thing. People are no longer being killed, court dockets are less crowded, parents can concentrate on driving safely. It is such a good thing that sometimes particularly courageous congregations take risks to achieve it. Urban churches have opened their facilities to youth recreational programs to try to reduce gang violence. Churches in areas beset by ethnic fighting have opened their buildings as refuges, hoping killers would respect the ancient tradition of sanctuary (with mixed success). Churches have housed and clothed battered women or refugees to keep them in safe places away from fighting. All these activities, and many more, have protected people from the harms caused by violence.

But irenic peace, as an end goal in itself, has limitations. Consider the case of the pastors in Birmingham, Alabama. Their city was in the throes of turmoil. Shadowy zealots planted bombs that killed innocent people. A general strike undermined commercial prosperity. Police beat protestors on national television. Birmingham had lost its tranquil safety, and people were afraid to go into town.

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<sup>1</sup> I am drawing my classification of “irenic” v. “shalomic” peace from Kenneth Boulding's *Stable Peace* (University of Texas, 1978).

The pastors declined to sit quietly by. They did not take up the sword of stridency, either. Instead, they chose to work for irenic peace. They wrote a thoughtful letter to the man they identified as the chief troublemaker in town, a fellow believer and pastor. The pastors acknowledged that there was some justice in the troublemaker's cause, but urged him to seek a safer, slower, more "peaceable" way of working toward his goals.

These pastors seem to have acted out of genuine Christian concern. I can easily imagine being a part of that group, striving to find some way to balance the need for justice with the ministry of reconciliation which is so central to the Church's calling. Work for justice, I might have urged, but do it gently, so feelings do not run too high and people can get along with each other.

Martin Luther King, Jr. got the letter while he was in the Birmingham jail, arrested for his role in leading demonstrations against segregation. He wrote a response, possibly the most famous epistle from prison in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which included this commentary on the limitations of irenic peace:

Before closing I feel impelled to mention one other point in your statement that has troubled me profoundly. You warmly commended the Birmingham police force for keeping "order" and "preventing violence..."

It is true that the police have exercised a degree of discipline in handling the demonstrators. In this sense they have conducted themselves rather "nonviolently" in public. But for what purpose? To preserve the evil system of segregation. Over the past few years I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. I have tried to make clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or perhaps even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends. Perhaps Mr. Connor and his policemen have been rather nonviolent in public, as was Chief Pritchett in Albany, Georgia, but they have used the moral means of nonviolence to maintain the immoral end of racial injustice. As T. S. Eliot has said: "The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason."<sup>2</sup>

To King, the peace toward which Christians should strive was more than irenic tranquility. King had a "shalomic" notion of peace, based on the ancient Hebrew word and its implication of justice, right relationships, and reconciliation. King sought what he called the "beloved community" where everyone counted and cared regardless of race or other individual differences. To settle for irenic tranquility without justice and reconciliation would delay peace, not bring it into being, in King's view.

#### **D. Needed: A Full Peacemaking Toolbox**

There are good reasons for each of these three kinds of responses. A church might do well on some occasions to stay out of the way on public issues. Maybe the congregation is in a tight spot and needs to focus on internal dynamics. Maybe no avenue is open for

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" accessed May 11, 2012 at [http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html).

the church's intervention – although this is true very seldom, as we will see. Maybe the issue really is too small to warrant a lot of energy and attention from a church group.

On other occasions, it might be best if the church would stand up and advocate a particular outcome on a public issue. This might occur, for example, when the church sees a group being trampled in a public debate because it is marginalized, poor, powerless, or otherwise unable to be heard in the hubbub surrounding the issue.

There will also be times when pacification is crucial. If people are dying, or in some other way being blown off the field of battle, the church can play a crucial role for truth and the Kingdom by separating warring parties, giving refuge to people who are fleeing, or the like. Keeping people alive and engaged until such time as they can begin to work together to resolve problems is an important ministry, even if one is firmly committed to a shalomic peace.

But if these are the only tools in our box, we cannot effectively be peacemaking churches, in the full sense of the word. We can watch, we can agitate, we can pacify, but ultimately the contest of issues will be left to natural processes. If we agitate, our stridency will join with others, and be opposed by still others, and the outcome might be the same as if someone else was agitating. Violence is possible at the hands of Christian zealots, with all the dangers that come when we mistake might for right. If we pacify, we suppress society's default conflict processes for a while, but we do nothing to alter the dynamics that gave them energy. Without more, we risk prolonging injustice or forestalling resolution while pressures build up to ever higher levels.

## **II. The Possibility of a Peacemaking Church in Public Conflict**

Can Christians, through their churches, do more than watch, agitate, or pacify? The answer is yes: the Christian church is uniquely equipped, by theology and demographics, for shalomic peacemaking, helping people to find ways to build justice and right relationships on the most contentious of public issues. We will explore this idea through three propositions: one theological, one demographic, and one drawing from the literature of peace and conflict studies.

### **A. Theological Proposition: Because God is omnipotent, loving, and just, Christians can be agents of hope in the darkest conflict because they can have faith that peace and justice are always possible.**

Conflict often appears to be at best a zero-sum game: anything one person gains comes at the expense of someone else. Other conflicts can present as being worse, fitting negative-sum assumptions where conflict is seen as a losing proposition in which every

gain by someone is more than balanced by even greater losses for others. And if conflict is either zero-sum or negative-sum, then there is a good chance that someone – or even everyone! -- is necessarily not going to be all right when the conflict is over.

These normal reactions to serious conflict are expressions of despair, since they all imply that there has to be a loser, someone emerging from the conflict with needs unmet. The best one can do is try to minimize the suffering, or make sure it gets deflected onto someone else.

Where despair prevails, its gloomy forebodings become self-fulfilling prophecies. Defensiveness sets in. People become less able to stay objective about the issues and the facts of the situation. Their perceptions are skewed. Despairing disputants find it very hard to see opponents in any objective way, or to hear accurately what they might have to say. Creativity declines, and with it the possibility of coming up with new ideas about how to resolve matters. Trying to resolve conflict from a position of despair is like trying to find one's way on a dark night with ears plugged to avoid hearing scary noises, flashlight clutched in a pocket to keep from giving away one's position, and eyes squeezed shut out of fear. The chances of finding a good path are poor, to say the least, so the despairing disputant will probably stay pretty close to where she starts, unwilling to venture too far from where she has always stood.

Any serious conflict is risky. But here we come to our first theological argument: to a believer in a loving, omnipotent God, despair is unnecessary. In fact, to despair is to disbelieve. Consider some basic ideas of Christianity, key tenets which separate us from the secular worldview.

### **1. God loves us**

Maybe the most fundamental belief of any Christian is the conviction that God created the world out of love for the Creation (including us humans). It is possible to believe in a creator God without believing the creation was an act of love – I suppose in this theology the god creates accidentally, or creates and moves on to other interests. But Christianity explains Creation as an act of love.

At the heart of our faith is confidence that God loves us both on the broadest scale as part of the universal Creation, and on the personal scale for each individual, specially created, known, and cared for. These notions are so central that our faith would crumble if it ever turned out that God doesn't love us.

So the Christian builds her life around God's eternal, infinite, personal love. And what does this love mean? Can we define God's love?

We can't fully explore what may be an infinite question. But for our purposes here, we don't have to discover what God's love means in all its vastness. Even a minimal

understanding of love will do. For example, consider this rather skimpy definition of love: *wanting the loved one to have means to meet his needs.*

Notice what this version of love leaves out. First, while it does expect the lover to think about the loved one's welfare, it does not go overboard in this direction. We are used to images of love in which the lover promises to meet not only the loved one's needs, but also her wants, even her whims. George Bailey promises Mary the moon in *It's a Wonderful Life*, even before he is ready to admit he loves her. Compared to these extravagant wishes, our definition seems downright stingy. As long as the loved one has means to meet her needs, the lover is content.

I don't think any believer would accuse this definition of overstating the love of a God who would create a world as beautiful and bountiful as ours, or who would suffer poverty, scorn, betrayal, and death to redeem us.

So if we can live with this severely conservative definition – wanting the loved one to have means to meet needs – we can be confident we aren't overstating what God's love means. And when we say that God loves each person, we are saying something important about conflict: that God loves the parties on each side of the conflict, everyone involved. By our conservative definition, this means God wants all disputants to have means to meet their needs.

There are two major implications to this article of belief. The first applies to those who are disciples committed to following God, and to being as much like God as they can be. So if God loves every participant in a conflict, disciples of God recognize that they, too, are to love them. In our context, this love means only that disciples recognize they are expected to want all sides to have means to meet their needs.

This sounds hard enough when the disciple is standing on the sideline watching a serious public conflict, wondering how or whether he should intervene. But the disciple also understands that the same thing applies to conflicts when he is one of the ones involved in the fray. God loves him, of course, but also loves his enemy. If God loves the enemy, then so must the disciple. The disciple must (at a minimum) want the enemy to have means to meet her needs.

This implication alone, where believers recognize it, is sometimes enough by itself to transform a conflict. But I don't consider it the most important implication of the doctrine of God's love. The second, and greater, implication arises when we consider another of the unique tenets of faith in God.

## **2. God is Omnipotent**

By definition, the Creator of the universe would have to have impressive power. It is possible to imagine a Creator who had limited powers. Maybe she could make a universe, and set it running, but would find it impossible to keep track of everything that

was going on in it, or to fine tune any detail as she saw fit. Or maybe in the process of creating, the Creator might close herself off from the creation.

Most Christians do not buy any of the idea of a limited god. They start with the conviction that God created the universe, but they don't stop there. God is not shut out of Creation. It is still subject to supernatural intervention.

We believe that God is omnipotent (capable of anything), not just plenipotent (powerful enough for a particular job, such as creation). This is a staggering concept, and not as easily understood as it looks. We say God can do anything, more than we can ask or imagine.<sup>3</sup> Does this mean God can do evil? Does it mean God can do logically contradictory things? Does it mean God DOES do everything, that nothing happens that is not directly caused by God and is according to God's will?

All of these are big questions. I would answer "no, no, and no" but some of my fellow Christians might disagree with me. Fortunately, we don't have to resolve all these issues. We can proceed if we can agree that omnipotence, at the minimum, means being able to accomplish anything you want to accomplish. Or, to put it even more simply and fundamentally, anything an omnipotent person wants is possible.

Note that this definition doesn't say the omnipotent one always does everything he could do. It just says the omnipotent person has the power (and the opportunity) to accomplish anything logically possible that he wishes to do. (A person who is forced to do what he doesn't want to do couldn't really be called omnipotent.)

We might want to say more about God's omnipotence. But we don't have to. Our minimal definition of omnipotence is all we need to proceed with our exploration of Christian peacemaking in public issues. If we believe in a God who loves us, and a God who can do anything, then we believe these two things:

1. God wants us all to have a way to meet our needs, even when we are in conflict with each other.
2. Anything God wants is possible.

This leads us to the following conclusion:

In conflict (as in any other part of life) *it is always possible for everyone to have means to meet their needs.*

Now look at this statement carefully. It does not say that in every conflict everyone's needs WILL be met. It only says that in a universe where there is an omnipotent loving Person, there is always a course of action available to us that would meet everyone's needs. We may not see it, but God does. Once we see it, God may not cram it down our throats. As a way of respecting our free will and making us partners in creation, we may be left with the choice of whether to follow the path that works, and God may honor our

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<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 3:20

choices and not override them. But where there is an omnipotent loving God, there is always a way somewhere to meet everyone's needs.

Also, pay attention to the word "needs." It does not say "wants." Not all our wants are possible. Nor does it say "crutches." Things we lean on heavily, that we think we need – maybe a certain bit of technology, or a certain lifestyle, or a certain pattern of work or play – these aren't necessarily needs, even though we may feel like it. A need is essentially non-critiquable, a bare minimum. So, for example, a loving God may ask us to give up something that we cherish but don't need because someone else really does need it.

It seems likely that, if God is loving, then when we are asked to give up something we think we need, we are really being asked to give up something that is less than ideal for us. A loving God might make the world that way, so that what is good for you is also always good for me. Alas, our world is fallen. So I suspect that sometimes I will be asked to do something that is not so good for me because it is even better for you. But the world has not completely lost the imprint of its maker, so I would expect that many times, maybe even most times, maybe even nearly every time, when I need to give up something so you can meet your needs, it is going to be something I should give up anyway.

Martin Luther King, Jr., gave a sermon on hope in Detroit, Michigan, not long before his death in the spring of 1968. I have listened more than once to that sermon on tape (which, alas, I have lost), and will never forget one of his key points. Hope, he said, is not wishful thinking in denial of reality, nor is it mere optimism that things will somehow turn out well. Instead, hope is a conviction based on the reality that the thing hoped for is, in some sense, already in existence. King was hoping for racial justice and peace, which he claimed he could hope for because these things already existed, in the mind of God, and in the design of the universe which, he said, "bends toward justice."

I don't know if a *fallen* universe bends toward justice as reliably as King believed. But if we find ourselves in a conflict where we are tempted to say "there is no way for everyone to come out of this with their needs met", let's be realistic about what the temptation is about. It is a temptation to lose hope. When we conclude that someone has to go with needs unmet, we abandon the belief that the way exists to meet everyone's needs. This temptation to despair is a temptation to believe one of three things: either God does not know a way out, or cannot make it happen, or does not love us.

We might believe that fallen imperfect people are unlikely to stumble upon, or agree to follow, God's way – a very reasonable concern, in light of the inescapable human history of unmet needs and deliberate cruelty – but this worry does not have to extinguish our hope. If we do not find the way out, it will not be because a way out never existed. God knows the way, and is willing to help us find it. It is not a mirage. We are searching for something that we can be sure exists. The believer, in a way impossible for others, has reason to go into the conflict hopeful about the outcome, and to keep searching as long as

necessary until the way (or more likely, one of the ways) is found that gives everyone means to meet their needs.

### **3. God is just**

When we say there is always a way to meet the needs of people in conflict, we are not saying we have to settle for a half-baked outcome just to get God off the hook and the parties to go home. The same God who is loving and omnipotent, according to our faith, is also just.

Whenever we think about human ideals like love and justice as they relate to God, we need to be careful. An infinite God is by definition beyond human understanding. I tried to handle this problem in the section on love by taking a minimal definition of love, something that would be so modest and careful that it would eliminate the risk of overstating the case.

A similar problem faces us when it comes to justice. Humans debate the proper definition of justice. For example, some argue that justice requires equality in results – that everyone is treated the same and ends up with roughly the same share of the good things in life. I suppose one might call this the “sibling approach” to justice. If one child gets a piece of cake, then the other children had better get a piece of cake of the same size, or there will be trouble. This version of justice is sometimes called “distributive justice.”

Others prefer equality of opportunity. This is the familiar “level playing field” idea. Advocates of this form of justice insist on everyone being treated the same, too, but instead of focusing on outcomes, they focus on the “ground rules” of life. Let those with greater skills or better work habits accumulate more, as long as those who get ahead are playing by the same rules as those who lag behind, and each has had a roughly equivalent starting point. We sometimes refer to this form of justice as “procedural justice.”

By either of these two approaches to justice, a society is just if everyone has in some sense been treated the same, either in terms of opportunity and “rules of the game”, or in terms of outcomes. According to either view, a society can be just even though some of its members are going without their needs being met. Of course, according to distributive justice, if anyone isn’t getting needs met, the situation is unjust unless everyone is suffering the same way. Distributive justice can exist whether people are made equal by lifting everyone to the higher levels, or by lowering everyone to the lowest levels, as long as everyone ends up equal.

Similarly, procedural justice is satisfied as long as everyone has the same opportunities, even if sometimes people are left without having their needs met, either because opportunities are too impoverished to supply everyone’s needs, or because some people waste their chances.

I am not sure whether God is more interested in outcomes or opportunities. The debate on the topic is by now voluminous, but we don't have to comb through it for the purposes of this argument. I am ready to adopt as a definition of justice something that draws on both procedural and distributive justice insights: **justice requires that everyone have access to means to meet their needs.** I don't say "everyone gets their needs met" because I am not sure whether God's justice requires it. Can a system be just even when needs go unmet, if the reason needs are unmet is that some have chosen to ignore their opportunities? Or, to put it another way, can it be consistent with justice to allow me to choose not to meet my own needs? And if so, does that put a duty on someone else to meet them for me?

I am pretty sure that justice, even in God's eyes, includes the option not to meet my own needs. God lets people choose not to accept salvation. If God is just, and lets people choose their own destruction, then you can be just and let me choose not to plant a garden. But you don't have to agree with me; we don't need to stake out more than the minimal claim in this context. God at least wants everyone to have opportunity to meet their needs, including when we are in conflict with one another.

If God is omnipotent, anything in God's will is possible. If God is loving and just, it is within God's will that everyone will have means to meet their needs.

Put it all together, and we have our

**First Conclusion:**

**In conflict settings, God loves each disputant, wants each to have means to meet their needs – and whatever God wants is possible. So it is possible to find a way through the conflict that gives everyone a realistic opportunity to meet their needs consistent with some notion of justice.**

Thus, believers have a solid basis for unquenchable hope. The way out of conflict exists already. God knows what it is, and because of love, is eager to help us find it.

**B. Demographical Proposition: Because the Church is the body of Christ, in whom there is neither Greek nor Jew, to which God gave the ministry of reconciliation, it is charged with, and specially fitted for, the job of helping people find resolutions to tough conflicts.**

**1. The church is the body of Christ**

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul spends a good deal of time teaching the believers how they should function as a congregation. He instructs them about how to

treat spiritual leaders, and those who persist in sin despite claiming to be Christians. He gives counsel on marriage, and about how to deal with differences in opinion over conduct (in this case, whether to eat meat sacrificed to idols <sup>4</sup>). There is even advice over the proper way to treat each other at church potlucks!<sup>5</sup>

Having dealt with all these major sources of discord among the Corinthians, in Chapter 12 Paul turns to a new topic. Paul's burden is poignant: the Corinthians were ready to divide up into warring camps over minor issues. In this case, discord flowed from competition among the Corinthians over who had the best spiritual gifts. Some took special pride in having the gift of tongues, believing that rather spectacular gift marked them as more spiritual than others. Apparently, the Corinthians who spoke in tongues got on the nerves of those who didn't. It couldn't have helped that the tongues-speakers would often go without translating their messages into Greek, leaving everyone else wondering what was going on. Nor did it help that many in the congregation didn't see much value in the less vivid gifts, including the ability to help those in need, or to help people get along with each other.

So Paul first had to write Chapter 12, to try to re-orient the Corinthians' attitude toward their individual variations in skills and aptitudes. Think of yourselves as a body, Paul suggests; not just any body, but the actual Body of Christ. "All of you together are the one body of Christ and each one of you is a separate and necessary part of it."<sup>6</sup>

The differences among the members of the church are not, according to Paul, something to regret, and certainly no reason for dissension. Instead, our differences are the keys to being the Body of Christ. No one of us, no matter how supremely gifted, can by herself embody Christ in this world. Only all of us together can do that – and even then, only if we all have our own unique kinds of abilities and interests. Just as the human body has to have thousands of different parts, and would disintegrate (or at the very minimum be badly handicapped) without even a few of them, so does the Body of Christ in Corinth need each person's unique mix of gifts, so that the entire congregation can do what needs to be done in Corinth.

This kind of thinking, if the Corinthians would buy into it, would go a long way toward helping them grow past their discord. But Paul can't rest here, because those who want to take pride in their more visible gifts would still do so, even if they also learned to give at least some honor to the more internal or "private" gifts. But Paul has a nifty way to undermine this pride. He points out that some of the parts of the human body that seem weak or particularly odd (or even embarrassing) are really the most necessary!

The Corinthians have to quit thinking of their diversity as if it was intended to sort them into spiritual classes. Not only does that make life miserable and stunt their personal spiritual lives, it disembodies Christ. A disembodied Christ may not be powerless in the

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<sup>4</sup> See I. Corinthians 8, 10:19-33.

<sup>5</sup> I Corinthians 11: 20-22

<sup>6</sup> I Corinthians 12: 27 (Living Bible)

world, but if the great commission<sup>7</sup> and Jesus' last prayers before His crucifixion<sup>8</sup> mean anything, a disembodied Christ would be tragically hindered in reaching people too busy to look hard for Him on their own. Christians have to see diversity amongst them as crucial to their being able to embody Christ in the world. Once they make this shift, they are finally in position to continue the work Christ started.

And what would that work be? We will address that in a bit. But for now we can see that the Church is uniquely equipped to do the work of Christ in the world specifically as a result of being made up of so many people with such a wild and confusing mix of skills and gifts.

## **2. In whom there is neither Greek nor Jew**

Alas, because we are like the Corinthians, we do not get the message. We, too, are guilty of valuing some of our members more than others. For some congregations, we commit the same mistake the Corinthians did, and act as if some people's gifts are better than others. But we might as well think of this as a sort of entry-level, first grade kind of divisiveness. For we have moved on to bigger and better ways to disable our ministry.

For one thing, we have divided into denominations. Christians have always argued about doctrine – the book of Acts records several such disputes. But we have let those arguments come between us in ways the first century Christians never seem to have considered.

For another, we have divided by race and culture. This was a problem for the early Christians, too. We read in Acts that the Jewish Christians were having trouble adjusting to the Gentile believers. And even in I Corinthians 12, Paul recognizes that there are both Jews and Gentiles among the members of the Corinthian Church. He also acknowledges that there are both slaves and free people in the congregation. These were distinctions that must have weighed on the Corinthians' minds, just as they would in our own churches today. (Although we should note that the Corinthians all seem to have worshipped together, slave and free, Greek and Jew. If the Corinthian church were in modern America, this would not likely be the case: Paul might have had to write Downtown Corinthians and Suburban Corinthians, White Corinthians and Brown Corinthians – and maybe Presbyterian Corinthians and Methodist Corinthians, too – to reach all the believers in Corinth!)

In I Corinthians, Paul acknowledges that the Body of Christ includes Jews and Greeks, and slaves and free people. (I Cor. 12:13). But he takes a different approach when he writes to the Galatians. There he says “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28) Paul is being admirably flexible here. When it suits him, he stresses

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<sup>7</sup> Mark 28: 19-20

<sup>8</sup> John 17:20-24

how we are a diverse group, Greeks and Jews and slave and free all members of one Body, a Body which can only exist as Christ's representative on earth because it is so variegated and colorful. But then later, when he has a different point to make, Paul stresses a different aspect of the same reality. There is no difference among us, we are all now heirs to Abraham (Galatians 3:29). We are no longer Jews and Greeks, slave and free, male and female: we are one in Christ.

Paul's flexibility in emphasizing our differences and our unity leads to a significant insight about the Church's role in public conflict: **when the community around us is faced with a serious, intractable conflict, the Church can usually be counted on to find among its members people on all sides of the issue.**

In modern North American Christianity, we often cannot see this, because we don't see very well outside the walls of our own relatively homogenous denominations. But taken together, all the churches in a community are very likely to include among their members a liberal seasoning, at least, of each political viewpoint represented in that community. If you were a First Century non-Christian in Corinth, you could look in the church windows and see some people who look like you: some Greeks, some Jews, some slaves, etc. If you are an early 21st Century non-Christian in the abortion debate (or the capital punishment, or the environmental protection, or the gay rights debate), you could look in the church windows and see some people who look like you. At least, you could if you went around to enough different denominations and looked in all their windows.

Some believers are uncomfortable with this fact. They wonder if it's healthy for a church to have pro-choice and pro-life members, or some members who oppose and some who support recognizing gay marriages. The stakes in these debate are very high. Someone in each debate must be wrong, and thus must be (unwittingly) promoting evil with their views. Yet here I am saying that either side in these debates SHOULD be able to find like-thinkers among believers. Shouldn't the Church be a little more committed to Truth than I seem to be, and a little less accommodating to Error? Wouldn't it be better if the Church would get clear on what is True, and then either re-educate those in Error or push them off the membership rolls?

Truth is crucial, and we all have to live by the light we are given. Refusal to conform to the will of God is sin, and church leaders are right to subject persistent sinners to church discipline. But what should they do when there is a minority in the congregation who, doing their best to understand God's will, don't agree with the leaders about what that will is?

If the leadership tries to impose rigid uniformity of opinion on matters of public debate, there are costs. For one thing, we cut off voices within the fellowship who might be vehicles by which God is trying to teach us. Of course, if the leadership were infallible, this would not be a concern. But every denomination in North America was founded because someone else was seen to be in error. And most of those denominations have had to adapt their teachings because they found some of their own original ideas to be wrong. It's the old human problem: we see only as in a glass, darkly. Leaders need to be

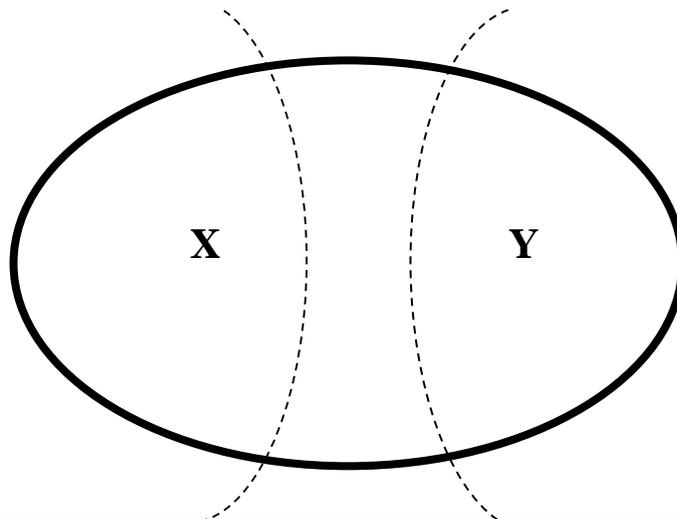
humble even when they're being firm. Room must be left in the congregation for alternative viewpoints that might teach us. Even when the congregation has taken a formal stand, and has asked those who still disagree to acknowledge the stand and conform to it as appropriate, room should be left for dialogue about the position. God has gifted us diversely so that we can grow into the image of Christ. Stifle the diversity, and you stifle the growth.

And you also stifle the Church's ability to reach others. A church of members with identical opinions would seem pretty inaccessible to a newcomer. How could he ever find a way to imagine himself as a member of the congregation? What evidence would he have that anyone like himself ever found his way in? How can I believe that God wants me "Just As I Am" if there's no one like me in the fellowship?

Stifling diversity, then, cripples the Body of Christ from within. It cuts off an engine of spiritual growth – disagreement – and makes numerical growth exceptionally difficult.

But there is another implication, more pertinent to our concern. The diversity we bring to our congregational life equips us to do the work God has for us.

Consider how Christian diversity might specially fit the Church to work in public issues. Assume for the moment that some such issue has only two sides, which we will call "X" and "Y." Diagram 1 depicts the arena of their conflict (the oval outer border) and the positions each side has taken (the dotted curved lines). Conflict persists between X and Y because their two positions do not seem to offer sufficient common ground to generate any hope for resolution.<sup>9</sup>

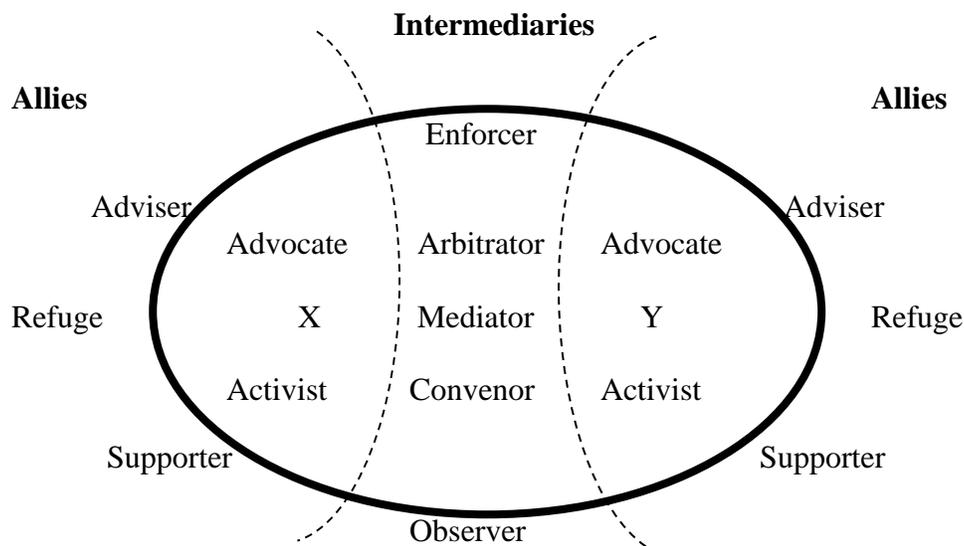


**Diagram 1**

<sup>9</sup> This diagram is an adaptation and extension of concepts originated by James Laue, "Ethical Considerations in Choosing Intervention Roles," *Peace & Change* 8.2/3 (1982): 34.

Secular observers of the conflict have no reason to doubt these appearances. Doesn't it appear as if conflicts are frequently unresolvable? Without a loving omnipotent God in the picture, there is no reason to think all conflicts come equipped with a way through.

So where in this picture can someone come in who has a reason for hope? In the simplest possible situation, there are six possibilities: one can work with X as a sort of **ally**, either from a point within the conflict, or from outside it; or one can work with Y as an ally from inside or outside the conflict; or one can work from an **intermediary** position between X and Y, either within the arena of conflict or outside it. Diagram 2 depicts these options, with some specific possible roles noted.



**Diagram 2**

In almost any public conflict situation there are people who could come into the conflict from each of these possible angles. But often the people who could be, say, an intermediary, don't realize the opportunity they have, or are unprepared to play their role constructively. And even if they were ready to do some good peacemaking, they might not be able to connect with others who could perform other intermediary roles, or serve as allies to the combating sides. So at best, peacemakers working from different points of view would be working in an uncoordinated manner, sometimes at cross-purposes, and usually missing key sources of help.

But now consider what might be possible if the Church took on the task of doing peacemaking in public disputes. All that diversity in the membership becomes a rich natural resource. One believer might be best situated to work with X from within the conflict, possibly because he shares many of X's views. But because not all Christians have the same political views or personal backgrounds, another believer will be better situated to work from Y's side. A third will be well-positioned to play an intermediary role.

Now imagine that all these Christians seeking peace were in communication with each other. Imagine that they even met weekly for prayer about how to best let God show the way to getting everyone's needs met. Undergirded by the unique brand of hope available to believers, confident in the justice of an omnipotent God, strengthened by the variety of gifts, ethnic backgrounds, and perspectives that we bring to life: all the tools are there for some eye-popping reconciliation work, precisely because Christians are so different from one another.

### **3. To whom God gave the Ministry of Reconciliation**

Perhaps we have made a convincing case that the Church's diversity equips it to provide some sort of supportive network of roles in people's lives. But how can we be sure that this role includes intervention in public disputes?

Certainly the Church has a ministry of reconciliation. Paul says so in II Corinthians 5:18-20. But the reconciliation Paul discusses in II Corinthians 5 seems to refer specifically to our alienation from God caused by sin, rather than reconciling disputes in the world around us.

But we should be careful to think through the implications of this limited idea of ministry. What does a sinner need to be able to reconcile to God? Of course, she needs to know the Gospel, and to confess her sins and seek forgiveness from God. Is there anything else she needs to understand?

Well, yes, there is. Jesus took pains to point out very early in His public ministry that salvation is more than a private, two-way relationship between us and God. For example in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus included in His basic prayer a phrase seeking forgiveness for sins "as we forgive those who sin against us."<sup>10</sup> Then Jesus explains:

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you." (Matthew 6: 14,15)

Taken literally, this means we cannot be forgiven by God until we forgive our human enemies. Matthew 5:23-24 reinforces the notion: we are not to bother with empty worship if we know of someone who has something against us. Before addressing God with our rituals and sacrifices, Jesus says, we have some business to take care of: get things straight with our neighbors.

Jesus takes it a step further in another section of the Sermon on the Mount. "Love your enemies," He commands, "and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5: 44) Surely this was meant to include those who persecute you personally – the bully on the block and the customer trying to get you fired. But Jesus' command to love enemies comes in the context of a discussion of political and religious persecution, using the

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 6:12

example of a Roman soldier ordering a Jew to carry a pack a mile (see verse 41). Jesus told his followers to love and pray for the Romans soldiers who had conquered their country. Surely the occupation of Israel count as a public issue.

Jesus' message of reconciliation includes at its most basic level the need for Christians to love their enemies and forgive them, and defines who those enemies are. Jesus refers both to lawsuits and to the Roman occupation. If Christians are commissioned to carry on Christ's work of reconciling us to God, it includes the work of reconciling humans to each other, including cases where relationships are broken because of legal and political issues.

So now we can spell out our **Second Conclusion**:

**The church, as part of carrying on Christ's ministry of reconciliation, has been given the task of helping people reconcile their public disputes. It has been uniquely equipped for that task by having among its members people with a wide variety of backgrounds and gifts, with natural connections to the various sides of a political conflict.**

We shouldn't be surprised by this. If there is a way through every conflict, known at least to God, and if the Church is the physical representative of God on earth, then wouldn't a loving God be likely to use the Church to help people find healing and peace on the toughest issues? And wouldn't God equip the Church for that task? Well, this seems to be precisely what God has done.

**C. Practical Proposition: Churches in most communities are uniquely equipped to minister in public conflicts by working from any of three points of entry for peacemakers: relationships, processes, or outcomes.**

Our motive for being public peacemakers is our hope that God always has a way to give everyone means to meet their needs justly. Our unique equipment for the task is largely based on the diversity of individuals in the Church who can work at peacemaking from all sides. So the next question is what should be our strategy? What should Christians actually try to do, to translate our calling and our potential into practical reality?

British Quakers John and Diana Lampen moved their young family to Northern Ireland in the 1970's, responding to what they saw as God's calling.<sup>11</sup> They hoped to help

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<sup>11</sup> This account of the Lampens' experiences in Northern Ireland is drawn from a lecture they gave at George Fox University on October 30, 2000.

Catholics and Protestants agree on ways to resolve their conflicts. They expected to help by discovering, and advocating for, fair **outcomes** to the conflict.

But the Lampens found things not going the way they expected. As newcomers to a highly polarized community, they didn't have the trust of either the Catholics (who saw them as Protestants) or the Protestants (who saw them as not reliably Protestant enough). No one was looking to them for answers to the conflict.

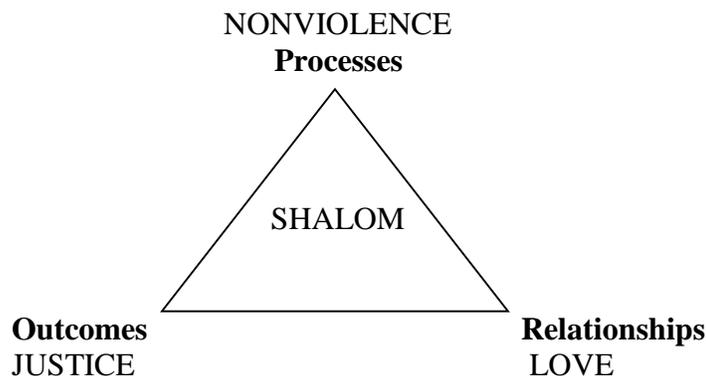
Undaunted, the Lampens settled into their new lives. Over time, partly as a natural result of living in their neighborhood, having their children in local schools, etc., and partly by deliberate actions on their part, the Lampens built relationships with people in both faith communities. Eventually they drew their Protestant and Catholic friends into new, positive relationships with each other. Out of those relationships came a variety of cooperative projects to expand personal connections among the two communities.

Ultimately these connections led to discussions about how the issues dividing the two communities could be addressed. These discussions didn't focus as much on specific outcomes as on how to design nonviolent processes that would allow Catholics and Protestants to interact and make progress toward finding outcomes.

So the Lampens had made a discovery. Peacemakers have at least three points at which they can enter a conflict – by working to build **reconciled relationships**, by developing **nonviolent processes**, and by advocating for **just outcomes**. That is, they can build each of the elements of shalomitic peace, one at a time if necessary.

All this work doesn't have to be done by one person. Some may be better positioned by their connections to the conflict, or by their capabilities, to work on building relationships, while others are better suited for developing processes or brainstorming, negotiating and advocating outcomes. Again, the ideal would be to have a network of peacemakers working on all these fronts in a coordinated fashion. The Church should be a rich source of shalomitic peacemakers, since it should be full of people who have spent lifetimes studying and experiencing God's shalom and developing their individual peacemaking gifts.

We can summarize the lessons drawn from the Lampens' life this way:



And so we reach our ***Third Conclusion***:

**The church is called – and should be equipped by virtue of its diversity and its commitment to peacemaking -- to approach any public conflict in its community from each of the three pathways to peacemaking: building reconciled relationships, developing nonviolent processes, and advocating for just outcomes.**

### **III. A Test Case: Abortion**

OK, let's not piddle around here. Let's see how these ideas might be put into practice in an issue that would be among the very toughest for the Church to play an intermediary role: the issue of abortion.

Let's imagine Christians in Paxville, USA feel a burden to undertake peacemaking in their community on the issue of abortion. How might they go about responding to that call? If the foregoing discussion is right about the Church's unique potential for peacemaking in public conflict, they might find themselves pursuing peace in five stages:

#### **Stage 1. Preparation in hopeful expectancy**

The Paxville Christians will first have to get over the hurdle that has paralyzed so many: the despair that there is no solution possible to the abortion issue without putting the nation through a bitter, perhaps intractable political conflict. The two sides are entrenched into positions that offer, at root, no common ground: either the fetus is a human person from conception and thus vested with the full panoply of human rights, or the woman has as much control over the fate of the fetus as she would over an appendix or a mole by virtue of her right to control what happens to her own body.

So the Paxville believers will need to spend some time in hopeful, prayerful expectancy. God loves everyone involved – the woman and the baby – and wants both of them to have means to meet their needs. So it must be possible to find an outcome that meets the needs of everyone.

In fact, some in the Church will conclude they already know what that outcome is. Some will say the woman has the means to meet her needs by engaging in sex only when she is ready to have a baby. Others will say the baby has means to meet its needs because it's not even a human person until birth, or maybe the third trimester.

When the Christians in Paxville realize they have divergent views, they will have to manage two things at once. They will have to hold those views in tension for now, trusting God to use that tension to help them in their process of peacemaking. The divergence of views within the body of Christ is a godsend, if God is omnipotent and loving. It's a sign that the Church has a ministry in the world, that someone – maybe everyone – has something to learn. If the believers do this well, they will come to see those who disagree with them as treasures, as gifts from God. “Even if I'm right and she's wrong”, they will say to themselves, “the fact that we sincerely disagree is God's gift to us to help us prepare to be peacemakers in this dispute.” This will lead believers to be tender with one another and their mutual disagreement, holding it in trust as stewards, treating it as a sign of God's commission to them to be peacemakers in the community riven by the disagreement they share.

At the same time, the Paxville Christians will have to stay in touch with the truth as they see it, careful not to give it away in pursuit of harmony amongst their group. If things go well, they will come to love and appreciate each other despite – or even in part because of – the spiciness of their disagreements. The temptation will come to smooth over disagreements, or even to move unconsciously towards each other in their views. Sociologists call this “social averaging” – the tendency to instinctively attune one's views and norms to the members of one's most important peer groups.<sup>12</sup> If the peacemakers succumb to unreflective social averaging they might lose the spice in their disagreement that God intends to use to do deeper, broader, more transformative peacemaking.

This time of prayerful, hopeful preparation is crucial. The peacemakers will be of greatest use to their community when they carry the conviction that God really does have a way in mind for every woman and every human being in gestation to have means to meet all their needs. Only with this conviction will the Christian peacemaker unlock what John Paul Lederach calls “the moral imagination” – the ability to see both the grim reality of what is and the divine vision of what God intends.<sup>13</sup> The Christian peacemaker has to carry this hope “like a live coal in his tunic”<sup>14</sup> wherever he goes, to sustain him, and to infect those he meets.

While they are building their hope, the peacemakers will want to study their community. Who are the opinion leaders? Where can they find the people at the crux of the issue – the pregnant women considering abortion, the abortion providers, the ones working to provide alternatives to abortion, the ones struggling with their understandings of the issue? Who has a stake in each side of the abortion debate – perhaps a financial stake, because they make their living in part on providing abortions, or opposing them, or even reporting on the dispute? Or maybe the stake is more a matter of pride or honor, because

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<sup>12</sup> See also the discussion of the development of conflict solidarity in groups, described as a process very similar to social averaging, in Otomar Bartos and Paul J. Wehr, *Using Conflict Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 70 – 78.

<sup>13</sup> John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> See Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 270.

of public positions they have taken, or in support of family members who have made painful decisions about having an abortion or not.

### **Stage 2: Careful listening.**

Once our Christian abortion peacemakers have prepared themselves and have felt the nudging of the Spirit to begin to act, they are likely to choose to enter the conflict arena by building relationships. Those with links to abortion proponents, even abortion providers, or common citizens with pro-abortion views, will engage those relationships and strengthen them. The same will go for those with ties to anti-abortion activists, or even just average people who oppose abortion.

No human relationship should ever be purely instrumental, a thing to be manipulated for the purposes of one of the individuals. We form relationships first because we care about the people. So these relationships will have lives of their own, growing out of the human connection and God's leadings as to how to love the persons the Paxville peacemakers are coming to know better. There will thus be a lot of "noise" in those relationships from the abortion peacemaking point of view. But, if we are successfully following the trail blazed by the Lampens, eventually in the course of these relationships the topic of abortion will come up.

And when it does, our Paxville peacemakers have to be ready to perform their first act of direct peacemaking: listening actively and deeply. Hopefully the peacemakers will have been training themselves in this art, and practicing it at every opportunity. They will want to listen to abortion disputants' divergent views until the peacemakers can summarize them to the disputants' satisfaction. Success at listening like this serves as an early benchmark of progress in the second stage of peacemaking in public conflicts.

### **Stage 3: Forming a working group**

As the group listens to people of various views, the next step will be to draw those who are opponents in the abortion debate into relationship with each other. If a community in protracted conflict is to find God's path to means to meet everyone's needs, enemies will need to re-humanize each other. Those opposed to abortion will need to see that their opponents are people of compassion and integrity, not just committed to justifying their hedonism. Those supporting abortion will need to see how their opponents are people of compassion and grace, not just rock-ribbed woman-haters trying to impose their religion.

At this point the Paxville peacemakers will realize anew the priceless value of their ongoing disagreements about abortion. Abortion disputants, long steeped in suspicion of the other side, will have their stereotypes challenged when they see how much the Paxville peacemakers love each other despite their disagreements. In fact, if things are going well, the abortion debaters will recognize that the Paxville peacemakers' love for each other is stronger because they have come to value their different perspectives. The

Paxville peacemakers' pursuit of truth is so precious to them that those who can help them by disagreeing have become special treasures in their lives. This kind of love across the abortion divide will be infectious.

In due time the Paxville peacemakers will see that they have found new allies in their work to build peace in Paxville. Abortion fans and foes will have come to know each other in a new light. The enlarged group will be ready to become a working group, committed to finding God's way through the abortion thicket.

#### **Stage 4: Collecting truth(s)**

The working groups will begin their own rounds of listening. The peacemakers will help the group listen, this time intent on collecting the truth in each side's views.

At this point it is impossible to predict with clarity what those truths will be. But perhaps faith that there will be truths to share is not enough for the reader at this point, possibly because you are not fully convinced of my argument for hope (that the existence of a loving omnipotent God means there's always a way available for everyone to meet their needs). So here are some possible truths offered as illustrations of what might emerge from an abortion working group's rounds of careful listening.

Truth 1: It is hard to justify some people's certainty that human personhood begins at conception, for two reasons. Theologically it is difficult because there is no way to know at conception how many people there might be in that single cell. Twinning doesn't occur until several rounds of cell division have passed. If the single-celled conceptus is a human person, when there are identical twins, it would have to be two people. Furthermore, the conceptus has no significant existence as a multi-celled entity: no nervous system to generate a unified experience of the world or sustain cognition, and none of the physical systems necessary to sustain it as a being with independent existence. Wouldn't it make more sense to conclude that personhood begins later, when the fetus has some of the markers of human life (like heartbeat and/or brain activity) that we use to determine when someone has died?

Truth 2: It is hard to justify some people's certainty that the conceptus – or, given Truth 1, the fetus with a beating heart and a functioning central nervous system – is just another appendage to the mother's body, like a mole or a tumor. In other settings, where someone has given consent to undertaking the care of another human being (especially as a parent), one does not have the right to unilaterally withdraw that care. Putting that person in a position of dependency on the parent (with the parent's consent) creates a right in the dependant person to continue to receive essential care and support until such time as a court can transfer that dependence to someone else. So the mother has an obligation to the fetus that she does not have to a non-person, once she has given her consent.

Truth 3: It is hard to characterize the act of intercourse as constructive consent to the presence of a fetus within one's body. We wouldn't hold a person to a contract formed at the moment of coitus – such a contract would be voidable as formed under undue influence. If the so-called contract involved, say, a supposed consent to an invasive surgery, and then the surgeon insisted on conducting the surgery after the patient had sobered up and said “no!”, we would imprison the surgeon for conducting the surgery over her objection. So it's also not obvious that we should hold a woman to have constructively consented to carry a fetus just because she has engaged in intercourse. (This is even clearer where the intercourse happens under conditions of coercion or compromised capacity, such as while drunk or under the age of consent – and possibly also when pregnancy occurs despite the parents' attempts to prevent it via contraception.)

Truth 4: It is hard to justify giving the mother all the way until birth to decide whether she consents to carrying a fetus. If the fetus is not a human person at conception, and does not become a human until some point in gestation (such as initiation of heart beat and central nervous system functions), the woman has had several weeks after intercourse to discover her pregnancy and decide whether she consents to it. If by her delay she creates a condition where a human person has come to rely on her for sustenance, perhaps she can be deemed to have consented to having the fetus “move in” to her uterus. Once she has waived her right to consent, she does not have a unilateral right to cut off that sustenance any more than she has to cut off the sustenance of a child after birth. Her rights thereafter would be limited to those implied by her right of self-defense, ie, to terminate the pregnancy only when it comes to impose risks to her life that exceed what one can normally expect from a pregnancy.

If these were really true, we could see a position emerging that gives everyone access to means to meet their needs: Intercourse is not consent to pregnancy. The woman retains her right to control her body as long as she has had adequate opportunity to terminate the pregnancy post-coitus. A conceptus is not a human person, as evidenced by the fact that we don't know how many persons it might be until later AND the fact that the conceptus doesn't have the basic equipment for independent existence as a single sentient organism. The embryo doesn't acquire these attributes until after a time period has passed that allows the woman an opportunity to make an intentional, informed, and reasoned decision about whether she consents to give birth to a human being.

If these “truths” did turn out to be really true, they would nest neatly, giving the mother time to make a real choice about whether to carry the fetus in a window of opportunity during which there is no human person yet present in the womb. (It almost looks like God designed it that way!)

Even so, there are many possible objections to these proposed truths. They may be answerable, or a complete listening process might alter them. But improving these truths is irrelevant to our present task. These proposed truths are offered only as illustrations of

the kinds of new ideas that might be distilled in a loving conversation between opponents and proponents of abortion, under the nurturing guidance of committed Christian peacemakers.

### **Stage 5: Joyful creativity**

If the working group begins finding truths that seem to be leading toward God's provision of means for everyone to meet their needs, the Paxville peacemakers with their new allies can embark on the joyful task of creating ways to spread their discoveries more broadly in the community -- and the nation. If God is omnipotent and loving, it is actually possible that some new synthesis of the needs and truths about abortion could spread into the secular culture, as it has in other desperate conflicts in our history (such as slavery, civil rights, and others). Some will be so fixed in their beliefs that they will not move. But in the case of abortion, where the weight of American opinion is ambivalent and ripe for new ideas, a creative synthesis could precipitate a new broad consensus about abortion policy.

### **FINAL CONCLUSION**

There may be room to quibble with much of the hypothetical scenario concerning abortion. But abortion was chosen for this exercise because it is perhaps the most difficult of the apparently intractable issues besetting the contemporary political scene in the United States. If it is possible to visualize how practical Christian peacemaking might make a healing difference in the abortion debate, it should be relatively easy to apply the idea to other serious but less intractable issues.

For too long church leaders and scholars of politics have overlooked the immense potential the Church has as a peacemaker in public conflict. But this need not continue. With proper preparation, perhaps through a program of Christian education for those high school age and above, churches could prepare themselves to form networks of peacemakers around public conflicts, both to establish connections with each disputing side, and to gain entry by working on relationships, processes and outcomes.

The results would include significant healing of the public square, and powerful witness to the truths of Christian doctrines about God's love and omnipotence.