TRANSFORMING CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT

An integrated framework
for understanding and addressing conflict
in Christian faith communities.

By

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Abstract

Churches have traditionally turned to conflict resolution measures, such as mediation, arbitration, and litigation, rather than conflict transformation approaches, when addressing congregational discord. In so doing, they miss the opportunity for constructive change that conflict presents and set themselves up for cycles of conflict to recur in the future. At the same time they diminish their self-claimed identity as followers of Jesus Christ, whose recorded teaching gives striking priority to peacemaking and reconciliation.

Chapter one introduces the context for this thesis. Much work has already been done to explore biblical understandings of conflict, forgiveness and reconciliation, on the one hand, and to apply current conflict resolution practices to congregational settings on the other. However, little has been done to develop a conceptual framework that seeks to integrate biblical understandings with the insights of modern conflict analysis in a practically useful way.

Chapter two of this thesis focuses on Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 and shows why this passage is a key biblical resource for understanding and addressing congregational conflict. Chapter three examines conflict resolution theory and practice and shows why a transformational approach is the most appropriate one for addressing congregational conflict. The fourth chapter brings Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 into a dialogue with current conflict transformation theory and practice. This conversation integrates theology and practice and clarifies the ways in which Jesus' teaching and transformative approaches to conflict both complement and enrich each other in the quest for lasting answers to the problem of congregational conflict.

This thesis concludes by proposing a framework in which the many resources available might be understood and utilised in an integrated way by congregations that seek not only to enhance their capacity to respond to conflict in healthier ways, but also to embody the teachings of Christ in their midst.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The pastor was gone. The congregation was divided. Like a deep wound, the rift had become the site from which the congregation haemorrhaged its members. How could this happen?

Some years ago, a lay leader in a thriving urban congregation was approached by the senior pastor to mediate a conflict between a fellow lay leader and a member of the ministry staff. In the process of meeting with the two parties involved, several other major points of conflict involving the senior pastor and ministry staff and other members of the congregation emerged. It soon became apparent that the presenting issue was merely a symptom of more serious conflicts on several fronts and, as these deepened, the congregation polarized along dividing lines which reached back to unresolved conflict several decades before. The denominational leadership stepped in and after a prolonged process involving interviews, congregational meetings, and legal advice, the senior pastor was transferred to another congregation. Eventually a new pastor was installed and a visioning process begun. A good resolution? Maybe. The presenting issues were addressed, a new governance structure was put in place, and human resource management was improved. However, the relational and interpersonal damage was not addressed, and while both the members and the leadership were aware of the strained relationships, and there was agreement that as Christians they were called to forgive, most were at a loss to know how to bring reconciliation. Within one or two years, numbers of long standing members of the church left, feeling hurt

and betrayed. The levels of lay leadership needed for such a large congregation to function were compromised, attendances began to decline, and financial giving suffered.

Whenever people live or work together in communal settings, conflict invariably arises. Conflicts vary in intensity from minor niggles and irritations between individuals to major disputes, such as the one described above, that involve the community as a whole. How constructively a community handles discord and division will be a significant determinant of the ethos, effectiveness, wellbeing, and, as the example above aptly illustrates, even the future survival, of that community.

This is true for all human communities. But it is especially so for voluntary communities of faith and worship, such as local churches, which are held together on the basis of common consent more than external constraint. The reason why conflict poses a more serious threat to voluntary associations is that it is easy for people to "vote with their feet" when a conflict arises or becomes too heated. Referring to a 2007 study on congregations in the USA, Thomas Porter (2010) concurs that "…the greatest predictor of church decline is destructive conflict" (Porter 2010:1). Furthermore, the widespread phenomenon of church splits is testimony to how commonplace and devastating congregational conflict can be. Despite boasting a theological discourse that accents notions of confession, repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation, local churches, it appears, often struggle to handle internal conflict effectively.

Perhaps one explanation for why churches struggle to handle conflict well is that many Christians equate conflict with sin. So it is common for

congregations to avoid open conflict and go on with "business as usual" while divisions, like a slow but relentless glacier, cut deep ravines and create dangerous crevasses just below the surface. Furthermore, while most Christians understand that they "should" practice forgiveness and reconciliation, few understand the dynamics of conflict or have the skills to move toward forgiveness and reconciliation. Typically, disagreements and offence simmer away and by the time they surface the relational differences are such that reconciliation seems impossible. As was the case for the congregation in the opening story, failure to address the issues openly and truthfully from the outset frequently leads to more serious and complex conflict involving polarized factions.

It is not surprising then, that Christian communities seem to be predisposed to "resolve" conflict by ending it as soon as possible, rather than to view conflict as an opportunity for personal and communal transformation. John Paul Lederach (2003), a pioneer in the field of conflict studies, observes,

> ...where there are significant past relationships and history, where there are likely to be significant future relationships, where the episodes arise in an organizational, community, or broader social context – here the narrowness of resolution approaches may solve problems but miss the greater potential for constructive change (Lederach 2003:6).

Not only do church communities miss the potential for constructive change when they take a "resolution" approach to conflict, they set themselves up for cycles of conflict to recur in the future. At the same time they diminish their self-claimed identity as followers of Jesus Christ, whose recorded teaching gives striking priority to peacemaking and reconciliation. The issues might be tackled using conflict resolution practices, but if the relationships are not healed and

sustained, the dividing lines will remain to surface another day around another issue.

Moreover, a deeper challenge presents itself today. In this post-Christendom era, where participation is increasingly based on personal preference more than on social convention or residential location in a particular parish, individual Christians have become highly mobile and congregations are more concerned about retaining their membership. When conflict avoidance is both the cause and effect of high mobility (in other words, when people leave rather than address a conflict or when conflict is avoided in order to retain members), a congregation's unpreparedness for addressing conflict is intensified. Hence, while a conflict may arise over a communal issue such as worship style, the fuel that feeds the conflict comes from the membership's general inexperience in peacemaking as a response to conflict. And, as Stanley Hauerwas (2001) points out, peacemaking itself is " an act of imagination built on long habits of the resolution of differences" (in Berkman and Cartwright 2001:325). Hence, it can be said that congregational conflict, regardless of the nature of the presenting issue, is first and foremost rooted in the challenges of interpersonal relationships.

Interpersonal conflicts are not a new phenomenon in the church. The Apostle Paul's pastoral letter to the Corinthian church addresses some of the conflicts that arose amongst its members. The issues which fuelled those conflicts were not too dissimilar from those that fuel congregational conflicts today: factions and congregational polarization around different leaders (1 Cor. 1-4), sexuality (1 Cor. 5 and 6), lawsuits (1 Cor. 6), marriage (1 Cor. 7), dietary concerns (1 Cor. 8-10), the conduct of worship (1 Cor. 11-14), and

doctrinal/theological disagreements (1 Cor. 15). A closer reading of 1

Corinthians shows that Paul considered these conflicts not just as issues to be

resolved, but as opportunities for spiritual growth and greater unity:

> So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the
> glory of God. Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of
> God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my
> own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be
> imitators of me as I am of Christ (1 Cor. 10:31-11:1).

Paul's admonition to the Corinthians highlights the peculiarities of

congregational conflict. Congregations exist for "the glory of God", to be

witnesses in the world ("that they may be saved"), and in everything, to be

imitators of Christ. When conflict erupts in the church then, there is much more

at stake than a resolution of the presenting issue. Congregational conflicts

challenge not only the unity of the church, but the congregation's identity as the

gathered imitators of Christ, and the integrity of their witness in the world. It

follows then, that any discussion of congregational conflict should include what

John Howard Yoder calls a "theological point of reference" (Yoder in Nation

2006:1-2) and, specifically, an understanding of the teachings of Jesus, since

Christians are those who follow or imitate his life and teachings.

Much has been written about congregational conflict. In fact whole

organizations dedicated to church consultancy and training have sprung up in

the last two decades. Some, like the Alban Institute,[1] seek to bring the best

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[1] The Alban Institute describes itself as "…an independent center of learning and leadership development with a focus on congregations. Located in greater Washington, D.C., Alban is a not-for-profit, membership organization that develops and shares knowledge through consulting, publishing, research, and education programs". See http://www.alban.org/ (accessed 12 October, 2010). Similar organisations include the Bridgebuilders arm of the London Mennonite Centre, and the Lombard Mennonite Peace Centre in Illinois, which offer programmes dedicated to congregational conflict.

developments in the fields of sociology of religion, organizational theory and conflict management to the question of how to approach congregational conflict. While a theological understanding of conflict and its resolution implicitly underpins these efforts, it is nevertheless in the background and the focus is pragmatic rather than theological or spiritual. For example, Rabbi Edwin Friedman's (1985) application of family systems theory to congregational life continues to shape practitioners' understandings of the sociological dynamics of congregational conflict today (Parsons and Leas 1993; Blackburn and Brubaker 1999; Brubaker 2009). Similarly more recent studies of congregational conflict have used organizational theory as their frame of reference (Brubaker 2009).

Others involved in resourcing congregations, like Ken Sande of Peacemaker Ministries,[2] apply Biblical principles of peacemaking and offer practical training to congregations and leaders (White and Blue 1985; Sande 2000; Reese 2005). Alfred Poirier's book, *The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict* (2006) is a good example of this approach. Poirier begins with theology and co-opts conflict resolution practices, such as arbitration and mediation, in his efforts to address congregational conflict in ways that are biblically congruent.

A third approach zeroes in on the pastoral concerns of interpersonal conflict and offers both theological teaching through biblical examples and practical guidance on forgiveness and reconciliation. This approach is most clearly exemplified in the multiple works of David Augsburger, among others (Muller-Fahrenholz 1997; Ortberg 2003; Sphar and Smith 2003; Worthington

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[2] While Peacemaker Ministries is located in the USA, it has spawned offshoots such as Peacewise in Australia and Resolve in New Zealand.

2003; Tovey, Kennedy et al. 2006). In a somewhat similar vein, yet others focus

on the spirituality of forgiveness and reconciliation (Morton 1994; Powell 1999;

Schreiter 2006; Katongole and Rice 2008), while Alan Kreider et al (2005)

stress the importance of building cultures of peace in congregations.

The question arises then, with such a plethora of both theological and

practical resources available, why do so many congregations (and indeed,

whole denominations) struggle to handle conflict well? In his study on conflict

management in faith-based organizations, Brian Bloch (2009) offers some

helpful insights,

> Every organization has to deal with conflicts. Many deal with them on an
> ad hoc basis without articulating a standard way to process conflicts.
> Few have gone to the extent of designing a conflict management system
> (CMS). Faith-based organizations (FBOs) are no exception. While many
> FBOs have well-developed programs for conciliation, mediation, and
> scripture-based peacemaking, very few religious communities have
> taken advantage of the CMS approach to their internal conflicts (Bloch
> 2009:1).

In other words, much has been done to advance biblical approaches to conflict,

forgiveness and reconciliation on the one hand, and to apply current conflict

resolution practices to congregational settings on the other. But little has been

done to provide a framework in which these resources might be understood and

utilised in an integrated way. So when a church looks for resources to address a

conflict, it is confronted with a confusing array of resources, with no way to

prioritize or integrate their application.

There is however one notable exception to this bewildering array:

Thomas Porter's (2010) recently published integrative work, *The Spirit and Art

of Conflict Transformation*. Here Porter brings together conflict theory, theology,

restorative and mediation processes and spiritual rituals, within an overarching

transformative paradigm. His work forms the operational basis for the United Methodist organization, JUSTPEACE Centre for Mediation and Conflict Transformation, and as such addresses itself directly (although not exclusively) to congregational conflict. Drawing on his legal, mediation and ministry experience, Porter seeks to articulate the "theology, theory, and practice of conflict transformation" (Porter 2010:5).

Porter begins his book by affirming his commitment to a transformative model for addressing conflict (Porter 2010:5-7). He briefly notes the differences between conflict resolution approaches and conflict transformation but, other than describing his experiential journey to arrive at this preference, he provides neither a theoretical nor a theological rationale for doing so.

This thesis seeks to deepen the conversation between conflict theory and theology and as such functions as a prelude to Porter's integrated and pragmatic contribution to the issue of congregational conflict. In other words, this thesis provides the rationale and framework for a theologically integrated conflict transformation model (such as the one Porter advances) as the most appropriate for worshipping communities to understand and respond constructively to the perennial problem of interpersonal conflict. Where Porter answers the question of how a transformational approach might be applied in a congregational context, this thesis addresses the question of why a theologically integrated transformative model is most appropriate in such a setting.

Therefore, the first section of this thesis will focus on Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 and show why this passage is the key biblical resource for

understanding congregational conflict and its transformation. Matthew 18 contains Jesus' most significant teaching on the question of communal conflict and emphasizes the eternal ramifications of how worshipping communities address it. Christian churches typically understand themselves to be communities of discipleship and discipline. One might expect then that the disciplines of reconciliation and peacemaking should be an intrinsic part of such a sense of religious identity. We will see that in Matthew 18 Jesus furnishes practical guidance for individuals and congregations committed to such disciplines. Interpersonal and congregational conflict can then be embraced as a catalyst for healthy transformation instead of an unwelcome precursor to division and decline.

Of course, as Robert Schreiter (1992) rightly notes, for faith communities the process of reconciliation cannot be reduced to a mere technical rationality, "reconciliation is more spirituality than strategy" (Schreiter 1992:26). In Matthew 18 Jesus not only teaches his disciples how to make peace with one another, he also points to the kind of spiritual values and practices that will undergird and sustain the commitment to peace and reconciliation. These spiritual values and practices are vital to the congregation's essential and ongoing sense of identity and purpose, as opposed to a set of skills which is "dusted off" and applied in specific conflict situations.

This section concludes that, far from being a rigid set of rules for Christians in conflict with each other, Jesus' teaching has all the potential and promise of a transforming initiative (Stassen and Gushee 2003): practices which have the power to break congregations out of the cycles of destructive conflict so common today.

The second section examines conflict resolution theory and practice and shows why a transformational approach is the most appropriate for addressing congregational conflict. The discussion traces the development of the field of conflict resolution and explores the ways in which philosophical differences have impacted current practice in the adversarial, collaborative, and transformative approaches to conflict management and resolution. It concludes that the concept of viewing conflict through different lenses as well as the commitment to not only end something destructive but to build something desired in its place (Lederach 2003:33), ideally positions transformative approaches to address the sociological dynamics peculiar to congregations.

This thesis concludes by engaging Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 in a conversation with current conflict transformation theory and practice. This conversation integrates theology and practice and clarifies the ways in which Jesus' teaching and transformative approaches to conflict both complement and enrich each other in the quest for lasting answers to the problem of congregational conflict. It highlights the key role that humility, sense of identity and kingdom perspective play in the capacity to engage conflict in transformative ways. Furthermore, this conversation shows the benefits of enlisting the skills of deep listening, respectful truth telling, and dialogue facilitation alongside the Circle process in working through the stages outlined by Jesus in Matthew 18. Finally, it demonstrates not only the benefits but the necessity of slowing the process down in order to overcome the dynamics which preclude genuine forgiveness and reconciliation.

The thesis culminates in the conclusion, by proposing a framework which allows for short-term responsiveness to conflict as well as long-term vision and

strategy. This reconceptualised framework could form the basis of a congregation's charter not only for addressing conflict in the short term, but for building cultures predisposed to peace and reconciliation into the future. In short, I will propose that such a framework is one in which the vast array of resources mentioned earlier might be understood and utilised in an integrated way by congregations who seek to not only enhance their capacity to respond to conflict in healthier ways, but who seek to embody the teachings of Christ in their midst.

Chapter 2: Matthew 18 - Toward a theology for addressing congregational conflict

Introduction

In May 2009, during my post-graduate seminar presentation at Victoria University, a participant challenged the legitimacy of reading Matthew 18:15-18 as a genuine teaching of Jesus. He expressed his disbelief that such a harsh process could be ascribed to one whose life was characterized by love, compassion, and humility. He described the process as one that promoted judgementalism, victimization, and, finally, ostracism. He concluded that the process was essentially a "three strikes and you're out" approach which was out of step with all that Jesus stood for. This critic's views are not uncommon.

Whether this teaching can be genuinely ascribed to Jesus is a historical question that I will not engage with here. More important for our purposes is the hermeneutical question of what these sentences mean and how well they cohere with the gospel account of Jesus' wider perspective and indeed with how they fit in the larger biblical narrative. In this discussion I will argue that Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:15-18 is far from being harsh and judgemental. On the contrary, when read in the light of the whole chapter, Jesus' teaching shows deep concern for his followers and urges that same concern on them toward each other, especially in times of conflict. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that it is indeed valid to use Matthew 18 as the primary text for understanding and addressing congregational conflict. The NRSV reads as follows:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' [2]He called a child, whom he put among them, [3]and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. [4]Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. [5]Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

6 'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. [7]Woe to the world because of stumbling-blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling-block comes!

8 'If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. [9]And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire.

10 'Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. [12]What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? [13]And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. [14]So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.[3]

15 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.[16]But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. [17]If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. [18]Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. [19]Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. [20]For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

21 Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' [22]Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

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[3] The NRSV is used throughout this thesis. Verse 11 has not been included as it is not in the NRSV text. Other ancient authorities add verse 11: "For the Son of Man came to save the lost".

23 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. [24]When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; [25]and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. [26]So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." [27]And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. [28]But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." [29]Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." [30]But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. [31]When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. [32]Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. [33]Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" [34]And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. [35]So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart' (Matthew 18:1-35).

Matthew 18:15-20 contains Jesus' most significant teaching on the question of communal conflict. Common readings isolate verses 15-18 from the rest of the chapter and tend to be prescriptively applied, with a focus on resolving the issue so people can move on. A more careful reading of Matthew 18, however, suggests Jesus intended his followers to pay as much attention to *how* and *why* the process in verses 15-20 ought to be applied as to the actual steps outlined. In contrast to prevailing readings, I suggest that the teaching of Matthew 18 teaching is not so much a skill to be mastered as a way of life to be embraced: a way of life crucial to sustaining the community of disciples, then and now. In addition, I want to demonstrate that verses 18-20 are an integral part of this process and that the central pericope needs to be read in the context of the entire chapter. The steps Jesus outlines in verses 15-20 are both an outworking of a commitment to living as people of the kingdom of God and a vehicle for ongoing transformation. Co-opting a term coined by Stassen and

Gushee (2003), I propose that the process outlined in Matthew 18:15-20 functions as a "transforming initiative", a regular practice commanded by Jesus that is the way of "gracious deliverance from the vicious cycles" of conflict congregations can get stuck in (Stassen and Gushee 2003:136).

However, one prior question needs answering. Is it valid to apply Matthew 18:15-20 to conflict situations in general when Jesus seems to be referring to a situation involving a specific sin against another believer? Not all conflict involves a culpable sin being perpetrated against another person. So should this text be limited to that circumstance alone, rather than being seen as a paradigm for handling all interpersonal conflict?

To answer this question, I suggest there is a close relationship between addressing sin and managing conflict; many church conflicts arise because of how a particular sin has been dealt with or because a failure to address disagreements is perceived to be wrong or sinful. Even in instances where the disagreement is over mere preferences, by the time the disagreement reaches conflict levels, there will usually be at least one party that *feels* sinned against. Matthew 18 is not merely an exhortation to the sinner to repent. Rather it is an imperative for the offended party to address the break down in relationships in a way that is congruent with the values of God's kingdom. While Matthew 18: 6-9 is unequivocal about the seriousness of causing another to sin (and, by extension, the seriousness of overlooking sin in the community of faith), the overall focus is on the relational aspects of sin, rather than on the nature of the sin itself. The health and integrity of the community is just as much affected by how it deals with sinners as it is by the presence of sin itself. The sinner's ultimate wellbeing and restoration is of primary concern. As we will see, the

emphasis of Matthew 18 is on loving accountability, not on punishment for particular sins; the context is relational as opposed to legal or positional. This allows for learning, growth, and transformation for both the sinner and the sinned against. As such, the process functions as a transforming initiative.

One of the things that holds the community of faith together relationally is its common commitment to obey Jesus' teaching. If a member deliberately flouts Jesus' teaching, a situation implied in the parable of the straying sheep, that individual's identity as a disciple of Christ is compromised (cf. John 14:15; 1 John 3:10). The same applies to the integrity of the community, because the things it holds in common and which sustain its corporate commitment to Jesus are eroded. It is this communal aspect which is often overlooked when attention is focussed on dealing with an individual's sin. I will demonstrate that Matthew 18 gathers up both individual and communal concerns.

It is worth noting that it can be the unexamined assumption of what 'should' be held in common which often leads to church conflicts. While the question of what constitutes sin is clearly something on which agreement is needed, there is a need to allow for diversity also. Church conflicts can betray an inability to handle diversity, particularly in external matters of behaviour. In Matthew 18, both the posture and the process are key components of the capacity to find unity in diversity.

The exegesis that follows will show that it is indeed appropriate to be guided by the principles and priorities set forth in Matthew 18 in situations of congregational conflict, whether the conflict is centred on specific sin or involves a more general disagreement.

1. Background and Methodology

As signalled earlier, I am principally concerned to understand the extant text of Matthew's Gospel rather than to establish the extent to which the teaching it contains can be confidently traced back to the historical Jesus. I will not attempt to assess the authenticity of particular logia in the chapter, though it seems highly probable that the tradition Matthew has redacted originated with Jesus himself.

a. Voluntary Associations

Recent research posits the Matthean community as an example of the "voluntary associations" (Ascough 2001:136)[4] that were common at the time, somewhere in the period 60 -90 CE.[5] Richard Ascough (2001) suggests Matthew's Gospel is addressing the pastoral concerns of a Greek-speaking Jewish Christian community estranged from its local synagogue. The exact location can only be presumed, but the important thing to note is that this community was in the process of working out how to function as a group of disciples after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. As a voluntary association, similar to yet essentially different from other associations in Roman society, the members no doubt grappled with questions around their identity,

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[4] Richard Ascough defines voluntary associations as "… groups of men and/or women organized on the basis of freely chosen membership for a common purpose." Ascough, R. S. (2001). Matthew and Community Formation. The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study. D. E. Aune. Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans: 96-126..

[5] Scholars disagree on dating. "… it is clear that there is little hard evidence to determine the date of this Gospel. Most modern scholars date it somewhere in the period from the 70s to the 90s, but there is good reason for seeing it as appearing before 70 AD, perhaps the late 50s or early 60s. We can scarcely be more definite." Morris, L. (1992). The Gospel According to Matthew. Grand Rapids/Leicester, Eerdmans/Inter-Varsity Press.: 11.

the nature of authority and organisation, and behavioural expectations, as well as fears around the viability of their community. Every one of these concerns can and did give rise to conflict in their midst.

Pauline literature bears this out in relation to the Christian communities scattered around the Aegean Sea[6] and further attests that early Christians were dependent on their faith communities for their physical and social support.[7] While these communities may have been voluntary, the range of potential alternative congregations was strictly limited, so that, short of individualising their faith, believers were largely restricted to one group in each geographical location. For this reason, the emphasis of Matthew 18 on healthy relationships within the Christian community had whole-of-life implications, which adds weight to the importance of this discourse for the wider life of the church.

b. Structure of Matthew's Gospel

The structure of Matthew's Gospel gives priority to the teachings of Jesus by arranging them into five major discourses and shows a consistent interest in the way the content was to be worked out in the community of believers (Morris 1992). Notwithstanding Matthew's redactional activity, some scholars propose that Matthew 18 (the fourth discourse) is best read as a

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[6] Paul's letters to the churches in Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia, Philippi, Colosse and Thessalonica address questions of identity, authority, organisation, and expectations of conduct within the community of faith. For a good summary of the issues covered in these letters see introductory notes in the NRSV Cambridge Annotated Study Bible. Kee, H. C., Ed. (1993). <u>The Cambridge Annotated Study Bible. New Revised Standard Version</u>. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

[7] For a discussion of the social aspects of the early church as seen in the Pauline literature see Pervo, R. I. (1994). Panta Koina: The Feeding Stories in the Light of Economic Data and Social Practice. <u>Religious Propaganda and Missionary Competition in the New Testament World: Essays Honoring Dieter Georgi</u>. L. Bormann. Leiden, Brill**:** 163-194.

single, coherent unit taught as such by Jesus (Hendriksen 1973; Morris 1992; Hagner 1995; France 2007). The unifying theme of the chapter is clearly the conduct of community life (Bruner 2004), and the chronological markers within the text and surrounding pericopes suggest a single time frame (17:24; 18:1, 21; 19:1). Moreover, Matthew's placement of the discourse in the period leading up to Jesus' arrest may reflect sound historical memory, since segments of it are similarly located by the other Synoptic authors (cf. Mark 9:33-37,42-50; 10:13-16; 35-45 and Luke 17:1-10; 18:15-17; 22:24-30).

That the discourse occurs between the second and third occasions where Jesus foretells his death (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23 and Matt. 20:17-19) adds weight to the notion that this teaching is an expression of Jesus' deep concern for the welfare of his disciples following his passion and ascension. Jesus outlines just how his followers were to emulate his concern for others as the primary means of sustaining the community of disciples (Marshall 2001:160). Furthermore, Matthew 18 echoes the Old Testament prophets' summary of what God required of the people of Israel. Jesus' teaching accepts the inevitability of conflict and sin in the church and exemplifies what it means to "act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8) in the midst of the particular challenges conflict brings. Jesus begins his teaching with a call to humility and accents notions of mercy and justice in the parables of the searching shepherd and the unforgiving servant which follow. Hence, the teaching in Matthew 18 is consistent with the broader biblical narrative, not only as seen in the book of Micah, but with Jesus' more explicit connection with the Micah passage in his condemnation of the Pharisees' and scribes' inattention to these "weightier matters of the Law" in Matthew 23:23.

c. Audience

Matthew 18:1 makes it clear that Jesus is addressing his disciples. His teaching is not aimed at the curious masses, but rather those who are committed to following him. However, in spite of the assumption of some scholars that the text presumes leadership structures that came later in the life of the post-Easter church (Hendriksen 1973; Hagner 1995), neither is Jesus addressing a structured, organized "church". The term *ekklesia* here refers to the community[8] resulting from Jesus' ministry and implies none of the structural or hierarchical implications the word carried in later times or carries today (Bruner 2004; France 2007). In any event, it makes sense to use Jesus' original audience as the primary lens for interpreting the text, with the Matthean and contemporary churches as subsequent loci of application rather than controlling concerns.

To reiterate, the unifying theme of Matthew 18 is clearly the conduct of community life (Bruner 2004), and Jesus' teaching is an expression of his deep concern for the welfare of his disciples following his passion. As such, it is best understood, not as a set of rules such as other voluntary associations of the day might have had, but rather as the guiding and sustaining principles for a loving community of the "kingdom of heaven".[9] This community would be characterised by personal humility, responsible sensitivity, and caring

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[8] The term for church *ekklesia* used here was a term common in the Greek Old Testament. It could mean any group of people and can be just as easily translated as "community". Morris, L. (1992). <u>The Gospel According to Matthew</u>. Grand Rapids/Leicester, Eerdmans/Inter-Varsity Press.

[9] Once again, that this community should be characterised by loving concern for one another is congruent with Jesus' assertion recorded in John's Gospel, that his disciples would be widely recognised by their love for one another (John 13:34-35).

commitment toward other believers. These attitudes would be vital to the community's capacity to work through the process Jesus gives them for addressing sin and conflict in their midst.

The process Jesus taught calls for perseverance and communal discernment in the pursuit of reconciliation in Matthew 18:15-20, and the imperative to unflaggingly forgive in the parable which follows (Matthew 18:21-35). However, this process cannot be understood without first attending to the attitudes Jesus enjoins on his disciples in the first half of the chapter. Yet, as I noted earlier, the process itself functions as a transforming initiative in that embedded within it is the potential for the attitudes which undergird it to be further strengthened and developed.

2. The Attitudes

a. Personal Humility: Matthew 18:1-5

Jesus' response to the disciples' question "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" points to humility as not only the sign of true greatness, but as the point of entry and the mark of belonging to the kingdom of heaven. The context in which the question arises is illuminating. In Matthew 16:16-19, Jesus has singled Peter out for apparently special status. In Matthew 17:1-21 the disciples are unable to exercise authority over a boy's demon in Jesus' absence, and this incident is followed by Jesus' revelation of his looming death in Matthew 17:22-23. Then there is the question of status and authority implicit in the incident around payment of temple taxes in Matthew 17:24-27. Here Jesus shows that, as children of God, his disciples are free not to pay the

Temple tax. He then enjoins them to exercise that freedom humbly, in ways which will not scandalize others (Bruner 2004). Seen in this light, the disciples' question was not only about status in God's kingdom. It was also about their community's organisation, authority, and, potentially, their very survival in their teacher's absence. Given the challenges they faced as a fledgling community going against the very fibre of the Roman Empire and in constant tension with Jewish religious authorities (Matt. 15:1-20; 17:24), the disciples' question is understandable. Yet it also betrays their ignorance of what the kingdom of heaven is about.

Like the child Jesus calls to himself (18:2), the disciples' commitment to Jesus made them vulnerable and marginalised in their own society. Warren Carter (2004) contends that the humility Jesus points out in the child,

> … is not a personal characteristic ... but a social location of powerlessness... Disciples form a community of children, marginal and without status as far as their societal structures are concerned yet central to God's purposes (2004:362).

Jesus' followers were undoubtedly on the margins of Roman Imperial society. The qualities of humility, meekness, gentleness, justice, purity, peaceability and vulnerability Jesus calls them to in Matthew 5: 1-12 alone would guarantee their marginalisation in an empire built on power, prestige, and coercion. Indeed, Jesus had already foreshadowed the hardships ahead:

> If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it (Matt. 16:24-25).

However, the humility Jesus finds in the child is not the result of self-effacement or imposed socio-political marginalization but rather the humility of

those who see the truth about themselves in relation to others and realize their total dependence on God. The verb "change" (Matt. 18:3) is in the passive voice, meaning "be changed" or "converted". The humility Jesus speaks of is the fruit of the disciple's willingness to submit to God's work of transformation in their lives. Moreover, as we will see, that humility is reflected in the extent to which the disciples follow Jesus' commands to pursue reconciliation (Matt. 18:15-22).

This kind of humility is what it means to be "poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3). It comes only when neither possessions nor reputation are seen as worthy of being clung to or, as Miroslav Volf (2006) points out, when all one is and has is viewed as gift. Stassen and Gushee (2003) echo Volf. "The focus of the one who is poor in spirit is not on his or her own humility and virtue, but on God's grace and compassion" (Stassen and Gushee 2003:38). Much conflict and sin is a result of the need to cling to and defend possessions, perceived status or reputation. The kind of humility Jesus looks for in his followers is the fruit of their surrender to God and experience of God's grace in ways that enhance their capacity to see the truth about themselves in relation to God and to other people. When it comes to situations of conflict, this kind of humility enables those at odds with each other to "see that of God in the face of their enemy" (Lederach 1999:25), to recognize a shared humanity and common need of God's deliverance. This humility acknowledges that the "change" Jesus calls for is not something to strive for, but a gift to be received.

True greatness, then, is only possible in total dependence on God on the one hand, and a commitment to "welcoming" the humble (weak, unpretentious, marginalized) on the other (Matt. 18:5). But more than that, Jesus solemnly

("truly I tell you") warns his followers that unless they allow themselves to be changed, to become humble like the child, they will not even enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is addressing not only the question of how to be great in his kingdom but how to enter it in the first place and to belong. He then goes on to unpack both the content and the vehicle of such humble belonging. In other words, what follows in Matthew 18: 6-35 is not intended as a contingency plan for particularly difficult situations, but as a blue print for everyday engagement within the community of disciples.

b. Responsible sensitivity: Matthew 18:6-9

The community of disciples is to be characterised by mutual accountability, responsibility for other members and self discipline. In this pericope, the "humble like this child" (Matt. 18: 4) who are followers of Jesus are described as the "little ones who believe in me" (Matt. 18:6). This description highlights the vulnerability of those who follow in the way of Jesus. Going against the grain of the world may prove costly. Moreover, as Peter himself had earlier demonstrated (Matt. 16:21-23), it is possible for fellow believers to become agents of opposition. Jesus shows that one mark of humility is a sensitivity to the effect of one's behaviour on others, especially the weaker members of the community, which certainly include, but are not restricted to, young children. The disciples are to show the same concern for their fellow believers as they would for a vulnerable and impressionable little child. He pronounces dire warnings for any who knowingly tempt or cause another to falter in their commitment to him (cf Paul in 1 Cor. 10:31-11:1):

> The millstone of which Jesus speaks is not the small, hand-operated stone, but the large, mule-driven one, making the picture particularly grotesque. When Jesus says that it would be better to be drowned with

this stone around the neck than to trip up even one little one, he means it would be a blessing if a person died this awful death *before* misleading a little one by false teaching or false living and so suffer eternal damnation (Bruner 2004:213-214).

Hence exclusion from the kingdom (Matt. 18:9) is the result of the offender's own choice to ensnare another believer. The world will ensure ongoing challenges for the disciples and this will be difficult enough (18:7), so his followers are to be absolutely diligent in not knowingly causing a loss of faith within their own ranks.

Jesus takes the image of stumbling blocks a step further in Matthew 18: 8-9, emphasizing the need for self-discipline. He again uses extreme images of self-mutilation to stress the seriousness of his words.

It is a matter of kill or be killed. Jesus' way of approaching the problem of hurting other people's faith is severe and death dealing. He commands us to look at what is hurting faith in ourselves and others and to kill *it* (Bruner 2004:214).

This would seem a natural corollary of humbly realizing one's own vulnerability and being diligent to deal with personal temptations which would divert from living in the way of Jesus (cf. Matt. 7:1-5). So, while "stumbling blocks" or temptations are inevitable, the community of disciples is to deal robustly with them because they threaten its identity as followers of Jesus and ultimately, their very membership in his kingdom.

Stumbling blocks within the community are primarily relational; sin at its heart is a failure of relationship and community (Grenz 2006). As Thomas Long says, "To be able to use the word 'sin' is to be able to speak with honesty about who we are with and to each other" (1993:166). In the same way that obedience to Jesus' teachings is relationally outworked, so it is with sin: sin is nothing less

than the "vandalism of shalom" (Plantinga 1995), that relational wholeness between God, creation, and humanity.

Having pronounced dire warnings to those who deliberately cause another to stumble, Jesus uses a parable to show his disciples how they are to regard a fellow believer who strays from the way of Jesus.

c. Caring commitment: Matthew 18:10-14

In the parable of the straying sheep, Jesus highlights the significance of even the weakest believers' true identity for how they are to treat one another.

> The function of this pericope in the larger discourse is to provide a foundation for right conduct in the church. That is, because every little one is so important to the Father, the way one acts toward any one of them is extremely important in God's sight. The passage thus provides a theological rationale for the preceding passage concerning not causing others to stumble, as well as for the admonitions concerning proper conduct toward disciples in the remainder of the chapter (Hagner 1995:525).

In Matthew 18: 10-14 Jesus addresses his disciples corporately. Whereas verses 8-9 are in the singular, verses 10-14 use plural pronouns and verbs. The implication is that, while hearers must take care as individuals not to cause even the least among them to stumble, the imperative to show active pastoral concern for the most vulnerable applies to the community as a whole. Each and every one of them is precious enough that their angels have direct access to God on their behalf (v. 10), and Jesus expects his followers corporately to show the same depth of concern. While it was common at the time to take care to not despise people of status in the world, Jesus' command that they show concern for the least accentuates the shocking inversion of status within the kingdom of heaven. Moreover, that Jesus likens his followers

to sheep emphasizes their essential vulnerability and propensity to stray. Unlike the similar parable in Luke 15:3-7 which refers to the sheep as "lost", here the sheep has "gone astray", and the purpose of going after them is that not one should be "lost" (Matt. 18:14). Hence the "rejoicing" (Matt. 18:13) at finding the one who strayed is not because that sheep is any more precious than the ninety-nine that never strayed, but because it was restored to the fold (France 2007).

In Matthew 18:10 Jesus warns his disciples to take care not to despise even one of these weaker ones who stray. To despise a fellow disciple is to fail in one's duty of care for them as a vulnerable yet deeply loved member of the community. It is the opposite of the welcome Jesus' followers are to exhibit in Matthew 18:5 (France 2007), and the humility that acknowledges a fellow disciple as being worthy of that welcome. Jesus explicitly says that this welcome of the least among them is in fact a welcome of himself. Here it is implicit that to despise a weaker believer who strays is in fact to despise Jesus himself (in line with Matt. 25:45-46). In contrast to a world that despised and overlooked the weak, Jesus' disciples are to seek out those who have strayed with the same love and faithfulness that God has for his children (Matt. 18:14 cf Luke 15). Anything less would result in the straying one being exposed and vulnerable to attack, and ultimately to the possibility of being lost altogether. This is something Jesus' hearers, coming from a shepherding culture, would have understood only too well. Once outside the 'fold' these disciples, isolated and uncared for, would lay themselves open to believing what Robert Schreiter (1992) calls "the narrative of the lie" (Schreiter 1992:34ff): that they are less than God's beloved children knitted into the community of disciples, and so

revert to living according to their old identity before becoming followers of Jesus (cf. Col. 3:1-17).[10] The way of discipleship is demanding, and only possible as the community of disciples looks out for one another (Carter 2004). It is not enough to take care not to harm a vulnerable believer by being aware of potential stumbling blocks, here Jesus calls his disciples to an active concern which leads to concrete action on behalf of those who have been led astray.

This concept of believers viewing one another as "little ones" has profound implications in times of congregational conflict. For those in positions of power or leadership this is a call to meekness: to exercise their leadership in ways that take into account the vulnerability of those they lead. To those feeling small in the midst of conflict, a reminder that ultimately, even the powerful in church institutions are "little ones", vulnerable and dependent on God.

Western society values "robust adult-to-adult" ways of relating and frowns upon "dysfunctional parent-child dynamics" within adult relationships where there are issues of power or co-dependence. Here Jesus urges a third way and calls his followers to relate to one another on a child-to-child basis which acknowledges their humble dependence on God and interdependence on each other. Hence, going after the stray is carried out in the posture of a concerned and equally vulnerable ("there but for the grace of God go I") fellow child of God.

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[10] This is a picture reminiscent of God's people in Ezekiel 34 where the shepherds (religious leaders) of the flock (the people of Israel) were judged for not caring for the people such that they "… became food for every beast of the field and were scattered" (Ez. 34:5). However, here Jesus is addressing individual disciples. In other words, the responsibility lay with the whole community, not only its leaders.

The statement of God's will (Matt. 18:14) carries the imperative that the community of disciples must imitate the shepherd in being vigilant and active in seeking a disciple that wanders (Carter 2004). So, having established the *why* (because it is not God's will that any be lost) and the *how* (with humility and an overriding concern for the wellbeing of others in the community of faith), Jesus outlines the process (the *what*) for seeking out the straying one.

3. The Process: Perseverance and communal discernment in the pursuit of reconciliation in Matthew 18:15-20

The process Jesus outlines in Matthew 18:15-20 not only provides the means for reproving the stray, it also highlights the primacy of a commitment to restoration and reconciliation. Jesus' teaching on how to approach the one who strays is nested firmly in the context of humble, loving pastoral concern (Matt. 18:1-14) and a commitment to mercy and forgiveness (Matt. 18: 23-35).

This arrangement emphasizes the fact that the nature of this process is not something done *to* a fellow believer in a punitive sense, but rather a practice engaged in *for* the welfare of the person and the community concerned, with reconciliation and restoration clearly in view. It nuances the fact that this community does not *exist for* the discipline of its members, but that the community is *characterised by* its members' disciplined commitment to sustain one another to live in the way of Jesus. This commitment begins with the individual.

a. Go one on one

> If another member of the church sins [against you], go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one (Matt. 18:15).

The textual status of the phrase "against you" is uncertain: it is present in only fifty percent of the manuscripts. Hence two scenarios are possible. Where the phrase "against you" is absent, the following verses would seem to refer to the process for going after the "stray" of the preceding verses. The focus is on the offender and the responsibility to seek them out is a corporate one. A second scenario, including "against you", would focus on the one offended against and the onus is on that individual to seek the offender out. This would be in line with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:23-24 urging his followers to be reconciled with those who have something "against you'. Either way, the process envisaged is the same in both scenarios. Whether restoring a stray to fellowship or restoring a fractured relationship within the community, the ultimate aim remains the same: the loving restoration of a member to the community so that "none may be lost". Especially once read alongside the call to forgiveness that follows, it is clear that Jesus is providing his followers with the individual and corporate means through which they would sustain one another and maintain the integrity of their community.

In Matthew 18:15 Jesus appears to be restating Leviticus 19:17-18 where failure to reprove one's neighbour is synonymous with hating them. Reproof is an expression of the command to "love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev. 19:18), and in Matthew, as in Leviticus, it safeguards the integrity of the community. A community on the margins could not afford to be divided by sin or conflict left unattended (cf. Matt. 12:25).

Nowhere in Matthew 18 does Jesus elaborate on the exact nature of the sin or offence. Hence the question arises: how does one know what needs to be taken up in this process? Is there a difference between sin, offence, and disagreement? And is there such a thing as "conflict for the sake of heaven"? "Conflict for the sake of heaven" is a phrase used in rabbinical tradition for arguments which are prolonged out of genuine concern for the wellbeing of the community as opposed to arising out of selfish ambition. They are seen as healthy checks and balances as the community tries to be faithful to God's commands. A hallmark of these conflicts is that opponents finally support the decision of the community regardless of whether it was their preference or not.[11] The question is: Is all conflict or disagreement harmful and in need of "resolution"?

John Howard Yoder (1985) and Robert Schreiter (1992) offer helpful perspectives on this matter. Yoder contends that, "there is in every serious problem a dimension of personal offence or estrangement … even when the issue at stake is quite 'impersonal' or 'technical' or 'objective'..." (1985:214). Yoder's caution bears out my earlier observation that, even in instances where the disagreement is purely intellectual, by the time the disagreement reaches conflict levels, there will usually be some relational dis-ease. And in this situation, Schreiter (1992) sees differences as invitations to develop the capacity to move from (or through) seeking common ground in the search for reconciliation, to acceptance of irreducible differences, and finally not only to

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[11] The story of Korah's revolt in Numbers 16-17 where Korah slandered Moses and incited relational divisions in an attempt to gain power, is commonly quoted by rabbis as an example of a conflict that was *not* for the sake of heaven. The difference between the two types of conflict seems to be across relational lines: the former preserves the integrity of the community, while the latter undermines it.

acknowledging the differences but learning to embrace them. So, to answer our question, is all conflict harmful and in need of resolution? No, not necessarily, but in light of the above, and bearing in mind the essentially relational nature of sin noted earlier, if the relationship has been damaged in the process of even "conflict for the sake of heaven", it needs to be restored.

It is not surprising, then, that the text does not elaborate on the specifics of the sin committed precisely because that was not to be the driving concern of the process. The central concern is not to be "what?" but "who?" So, rather than asking, "Just what kind of sins or offences need to be addressed in this process?" the better question may be, "Is the relationship with this person and (in line with Numbers 5:6 where wronging another is equated with "breaking faith with the Lord") with God jeopardized by this situation?" Far from diluting the seriousness of sin, this latter question both broadens and intensifies the application of the process to incorporate much more than overt sin. This is congruent with Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount where the focus is on a person's inner life as the root of external behaviour.[12] So, when an offence is either suffered or committed,[13] Jesus teaches his followers what to do: "Go, and point out the fault when the two of you are alone" (Matt. 18:15).

At first glance this instruction is plain common sense. It is wise to go straight to the source of a disagreement or offence, and a safeguard against the

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[12] In Matthew 5: 21-32 Jesus singles out anger as the root of murder, and lust as the root of adultery.

[13] The word "offence" functions in two ways. First it is something the victim experiences, and secondly, it is the action of the perpetrator. The way Jesus words his teaching leaves it open to both levels of meaning, covering times of overt sin as well as times when a person is offended without the perceived perpetrator being aware of it. In this way conflict situations can legitimately be taken up in this process.

gossip which so easily fractures communities. Also, the risk of public humiliation for either the offender or the injured party is lessened by the opportunity to get the facts straight and clear any misunderstandings at the outset. A closer reading which takes into account the broader context of Scripture yields further valuable insights.

First, while it is much harder to go and confront a fellow believer face to face, if done in the spirit of humility and mercy , it is, first and foremost, a tangible sign of the commitment to honour that person's integrity and *mana* in the community. In line with Leviticus 19:17-18 where reproving one's neighbour is equated with the command to "love your neighbour as yourself", it is an expression of love. It is so much easier to bolster one's own sense of righteousness by "sharing" the issue with a third party, or jumping to the second step of taking a support person. Jesus' teaching counters all that by insisting on a private face to face meeting in which the primary concern is to restore fellowship through forgiveness and reconciliation. Hence the encounter is primarily motivated, not by the offended party's need to feel vindicated, nor by the offender's need to be shown their faults, but rather by a desire to restore relationship with the parties affected.

Second, while there are undoubtedly risks involved in a personal encounter, a face to face meeting opens up the possibility of being able to 'see that of God in the face of one's enemy' (Lederach 1999:50). While the natural response to conflict is to distance oneself from the other party, Jesus urges his followers in the opposite direction and calls them to bridge the gap through personal encounter. This is consistent with Jesus' earlier teaching on retaliation

in Matthew 5:38-48 where the direction is relentlessly toward one's enemy, not away from them.

Third, the preparation for such a difficult encounter can be an invitation to see things as they really are. Just as flesh wounds reveal what lies beneath the surface, so it is with the emotional wounds people inflict on one another. As Robert Schreiter says, wounds are question marks about existence (2006:77). A commitment to reconciliation "involves finding our wounds and seeing if they can be a source of healing rather than of ever greater misery" (2006:81). Hence, whatever the sin or conflict is about, and whatever wounds are inflicted in the process, there is potential for self-examination and transformation to occur if the invitation to something greater and deeper than the presenting issue is embraced. On the other hand, if the meeting is about confronting a fellow believer about sinful behaviour, both the lead up and the encounter can be opportunities to grapple with just what constitutes sin and on what basis the person is to be challenged. At its most basic, the lead in to challenging a fellow believer's actions is first and foremost a call to examine one's own life before God. Jesus highlights this in Matthew 7: 1-5.

Ironically, Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7 is perhaps the most common "biblical" reason Christians give for *not* confronting fellow believers. Jesus' statement, "do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (Matt. 7:1) is held up as the first and final word, as opposed to the introductory statement that it actually is. Jesus uses the ludicrous image of someone trying to remove a speck from another's eye while having their own vision obscured by a log to underscore the importance of self-judgement before judging others. Clearly, calling a fellow believer to account requires some sort of judgement, but as

Jesus illustrates, the judgement or discernment is exercised in *both* directions.

John Howard Yoder (1985) points out that this discerning judgement doesn't

stop at the point of deciding there is indeed something to challenge, but

continues throughout the encounter that follows:

> If the standards appealed to by those who would reprove someone are
> inappropriate, the best way to discover this is through the procedure of
> person-to-person conversation with reconciling intent (Yoder 1985:214).

Hence this first step in the process is much more than a confrontation over a

particular issue. Going to a fellow believer in private also makes room for the

possibility that the issue will be resolved and the relationship will be restored: "if

the member listens to you, you have regained that one" (Matt. 18:15).

Regardless of good intentions, the reality is that sometimes a face-to-

face encounter is not enough. Individuals can be limited in their capacity to see

or hear other's points of view, can allow their own emotional pain or anger to

cloud their judgement and/or commitment to being reconciled, or they may

reach a point of realising the limitations of their own discernment. At this point

many people walk away, "agree to disagree", and live with the emotional

distance that results and lies dormant until the next conflict arises to further test

the relationship. However, Jesus' teaching does not stop there.

b. Take one or two others along

> But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so
> that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three
> witnesses (Matt. 18:16).

At first glance this instruction appears to open the situation up to even

greater conflict and polarization. Bringing in two or three others could be seen

as drawing the battle lines or as license for intimidation and even coercion. This

is clearly not Jesus' intention. Indeed, the instruction echoes Deuteronomical law (Deut. 19:15-19) where, in its original context, the witnesses were called for the protection of the accused, not for the bolstering up of the accuser's position.

> A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offence that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained. If a malicious witness comes forward to accuse someone of wrongdoing, then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days, and the judges shall make a thorough inquiry. If the witness is a false witness, having testified falsely against another, then you shall do to the false witness just as the false witness had meant to do to the other. So you shall purge the evil from your midst (Deut. 19: 15-19).

Commenting on Deuteronomy 19:15, Christopher Wright (2004) notes that,

> The purpose of the plurality of witnesses (cf. 17:6) is clearly for the protection of the accused, especially the protection of the weaker individual from the vindictiveness of a more powerful opponent ... This text is notable … for its insistence on great care and diligence in establishing the truth of each case, on the assumption that all matters of justice are decided in the presence of the Lord, the supreme judge (Wright 2004:224).

This concern for the protection of the accused was borne out by Jesus himself when he overturned the witnesses' requirement that a woman caught in adultery be stoned[14] in John 8:1-11. In this case, the witnesses' motivation was clearly punitive and merciless;[15] Jesus' response was unequivocal, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (8:7). Without making light of the woman's adultery (8:11), Jesus nevertheless exposed the accusers' hypocrisy and mean-spiritedness and they judged themselves (8:9).

The purpose of calling two or three witnesses is overridingly one of discernment and clarification as safeguards against false accusation; with

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[14] Her accusers appealed to the Deuteronomic Law in Leviticus 20:10f.

[15] The Law required that both the man and the woman caught in adultery be put to death. The fact that the religious leaders brought only the woman to Jesus betrays their malice.

forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration of fellowship clearly in view. Moreover, "that every word may be confirmed" (Matt. 18:16) gathers up the words relating to the issue of both sides of the conflict.

Every effort is to be made to discern the full situation and to bring the "straying one" back into the fold (Matt. 18:12-13). There is a sense in which, as the religious leaders in John 8 discovered, it is only after this communal process of discernment has been enlisted that the "straying one" can be identified. In other words, it is possible that both accuser and accused have strayed, or even that the accuser is in fact the one who needs to be exhorted to live more faithfully to Jesus' teachings. Maybe this is what Jesus was alluding to in Matthew 7:1-5. Whenever one sets out to call a fellow believer to account , one lays oneself open to being sifted and humbled in the process.

Furthermore, when disagreements arise over what constitutes sin, there are the corollary dangers of litigiousness on the one hand and libertarianism on the other (Yoder 1985). Jesus' instruction to bring in two or three others has the potential to counter both of these dangers.

Litigiousness occurs when the rules take precedence, when justice is equated with punishment, and when the rules are applied rigidly regardless of mitigating factors. It is much easier to apply a standard harshly when the person concerned is absent and therefore "other" (Schreiter 1992:52) than those present. Jesus' instruction to bring two or three others and to seek a second face to face meeting is then key in countering the risk of litigiousness. The desire to take it a step further again signals a commitment to the estranged party: they *do* belong to the community of faith and they *are* valued enough to

make the time and effort to seek a resolution and restore them to fellowship. This second meeting also gives the accused an opportunity to tell their story. Understanding the wider context of the perceived offence can lead to greater clarity and even repentance. The witnesses are then witnesses not only to the facts of the matter, but to a shared humanity, a common dependence on God, and a commitment to one another in community. As mentioned earlier, the decision to pursue reconciliation is based not on the magnitude of a particular sin, but on whether or not there has been a loss of fellowship (Yoder 1985).

But what of the opposite danger? That in shying away from litigiousness one ends up "sacrificing all moral-bindingness and all community by adopting in advance, in a general way, a 'rule-against-rules'" (Yoder 1985:218)? Richard Hays contends that,

> Love covers a multitude of sins in more ways than one. The term has become debased in popular discourse; it has lost its power of discrimination, having become a cover for all manner of vapid self-indulgence … One often hears voices in the church urging that the radical demands of Christian discipleship should not be pressed upon church members because the 'loving' thing to do is to include everyone without imposing harsh demands ..[But] The Biblical story teaches us that God's love cannot be reduced to 'inclusiveness': authentic love calls us to repentance, discipline, sacrifice, and transformation (1996:202).

A face to face meeting in the presence of others mitigates against the approach which would look the other way under the guise of "love". Seeking clarity, truthfulness, and prayerful discernment together sends a clear signal to the offender: this is a weighty matter. It is not that some sins warrant more attention than others, but that any sin which leads to fractured relationships is worthy of this process. Why? Because ultimately, loss of communion and identity lie at the heart of the "straying sheep". Seen in this light, it is the mandate of every individual believer (and according to Galatians 6, especially those who are

mature in the faith) to be committed to forgiveness and reconciliation lest neglect in this area cause a fellow believer to stray. Moreover, the presence of two or three witnesses constitutes a call to the straying one to reclaim their true identity as a follower of Christ and member of his community.

Beyond that, the process of prayerful discernment itself opens the way for the community to discern the parameters of sin. This discernment is key, not in the sense of knowing who is "in" or "out" in a defensive posture, but because as a vitally interconnected community (see Romans 12) all share in the reconciliation effected. Soberingly, all also equally share in the collective guilt when disobedience persists unchallenged:

> 1 Corinthians 5:6ff. speaks of the discipline process in the image of 'leaven': the church is the lump of dough, all of which will be caused to ferment by the presence of a few yeast cells within it. Paul thus says that there is a kind of moral solidarity linking all the members of the body, so that if individuals persist in disobedience within the fellowship, their guilt is no longer the responsibility of those individuals alone but becomes a kind of collective blame shared by the whole body (Yoder 1985:220).

The glossing over of sin and stubborn unrepentance, and the pretence that all would be well was the subject of serious judgement against the (false) prophets of Israel in both Jeremiah (23: 9-40) and Ezekiel (13:1-16) where it is described as whitewash over an unsound wall which will ultimately crumble, exposing the whole community. But given that all of Matthew 18:15-18 is in the first person singular, it is clear that Jesus intends every believer, not only those in leadership (who are not mentioned at all in Matthew 18), to take the presence of sin in the community seriously.

The final step in the process then makes sense: the outcome of the first two steps will affect the integrity of the entire community. If at the second stage

the offender remains unrepentant and shows no inclination to work towards

reconciliation through confession, repentance and forgiveness, the matter is to

be brought to "the church".

c. Take it to the church: the call for communal discernment

> If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (Matt. 18:17).

> While much has been made of Jesus' use of the word *ekklesia* (church)

both here and in Matthew 16:18, it is wise to remember that these are the only

times this word is used in the four gospels (Harrington 2001), and therefore it is

unwise to read back into it the structures which emerged later on. Given Jesus'

prior concern to respect the integrity of the offender in the first two steps of the

process, it seems unlikely that this final step relates to an institution as such but

rather denotes the community where the offender finds their home in relational

(as opposed to structural) terms. This would appear to be supported by the fact

that, in Matthew 18:17, the "you" who must treat the unrepentant believer as a

Gentile and a tax collector is in the singular, not the plural.

It is surprising then that so many commentators read formal

excommunication into this verse (White and Blue 1985; Morris 1992; Hagner

1995; France 2007). A more nuanced reading is required by the text. While

there is no doubt that tax collectors and Gentiles were outside of the Jewish

community of faith, Jesus nevertheless ate with them and came to be known as

a "friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Matt. 11:19). It seems more likely that

treating someone as a tax collector or a Gentile had to do with what

expectations one might have of them (see Matthew 5:43-48 where the

disciples' love was to surpass that of the tax collectors) and on what basis one might relate to them. They were to be treated as someone to be won back to following Jesus rather than as a fellow disciple. In other words, Jesus' injunction marks a shift in the nature of this relationship (with an unrepentant believer) rather than a break. As portrayed in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), this shift from inclusion to exclusion is made by the offender himself or herself. The posture of the father is always one of invitation to re-inclusion and restoration. Furthermore, in Matthew 18 the basis for that inclusion is clear: humility and love for others.

Nevertheless, social exclusion does appear to have been employed in the early church as recorded in the Pauline literature (Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:11, 13; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; Titus 3:10). However, several comments are worth making in regard to Paul's instructions as to how to treat unrepentant believers.

First, formal exclusion was an accepted and common practice among voluntary associations in Paul's day (Ascough 2001). The situations Paul was addressing were where a believer had lapsed into serious and open sin: for example, one who consistently caused dissension and offence (Rom. 16:17), or unrepentant sexual immorality and idolatry (1 Cor. 5) such that it was appropriate for the community of believers to publicly distance itself from their behaviour.

Second, the harshest of Paul's sayings in regard to the unrepentant ("drive out the wicked person from among you") is in fact a quote from Deuteronomy 13:5 where the way evil was driven out was by stoning the

offender to death. In addition, this command is embedded in a set of laws some of which the early church believed that God expressly allowed when they had been previously forbidden (Deut. 14:3-21 and Acts 10). Could it be that Paul himself had contextualised the Deuteronomic law by finding culturally recognised ways of drawing the boundary lines in the case of a recalcitrant sinner? In other words, Paul deemed stoning to be incompatible with Jesus' teaching to persist in the efforts to restore an erring believer, and so found other ways to convey that offender's decision to exclude themselves from the community by acting in ways that were counter to Jesus' teachings. If that is so, the contemporary church may need to do some contextualising of its own in relation to those who publicly flout Jesus' commands and choose not to respond to the reproof of their community of faith.

Third, several of Paul's sayings which have been used to support formal excommunication are nuanced by tempering statements. For example: "keep away … have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed. Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers" (2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15 cf Gal. 6:1). It seems that, even for Paul, the overriding concern of any disciplinary action was ultimately to restore the erring believer.

While scholars do not agree on the exact shape of the step in Matthew 18:17, they do agree on the need for perseverance in the pursuit of reconciliation. Warren Carter (2004) contends that it is unlikely that formal excommunication is envisaged but rather an informal recognition that the relationship has been fractured, by virtue of the offender putting himself or herself outside of the community by their persistent disobedience. Carter concludes that regardless of what excommunication looks like, this third step is

not the final word on restorative initiatives. Given Jesus' injunction that they

were to be a community characterised by a commitment to go on forgiving and

seeking out the estranged (Matt. 18: 12-14; 21-35), Carter's conclusion seems

justified. Marlin Jeschke agrees that "excommunication is the form under which

the church continues to make grace available to the impenitent" (Jeschke

1972:105). Regardless of whether Jesus is referring to formal excommunication

or simply a change in the basis on which the relationship is to be pursued, it is

clear that the erring believer first excludes himself or herself by persisting in

behaving in ways counter to Jesus' teaching and by their refusal to do the

things that make for peace (see Rom. 14:19; Col. 3:15; 1 Peter 3:11; cf Ps

34:14). It is equally clear that the community is called to persevere in their

efforts to restore them.

> … it is not the case that certain sins in themselves are thought to merit
> excommunication; it is persistent impenitence on the part of the offenders
> that attracts the penalty. For this reason excommunication can be seen
> as a kind of self-judgement, or more accurately as an external, symbolic
> enactment by the church of what the offender has already done at a
> moral and spiritual level-separated himself or herself from the sanctity of
> the community (Marshall 2001:158).

Marshall's view serves to reinforce the need for communal discernment about

the acceptability or otherwise of a particular action, as well as clarifying on what

basis the person in question must now be related to. The focus then, like that

already noted for the first two steps (Matt.18:15-16), is not on the exact shape

of any excommunication or disciplinary action, but rather on the commitment to

restoration. This is further emphasized by the verses which follow (Matt. 18:18-

20) . Whatever step followed on from the second face to face meeting, it was to

be marked by prayerful discernment and openness to the spirit of Jesus in

seeking a way to rehabilitate and restore the offender.

Hence, Matthew 18:18-20 needs to be understood as an integral part of the reconciling process Jesus is outlining.

> Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in My name, I am there among them (Matthew 18:18-20).

It is noteworthy that these verses are addressed to "you" in the plural (unlike verses 15-17 where "you" is singular), indicating that binding and loosing is a communal practice. This terminology probably reflects rabbinic Halakha practice which Jesus' hearers would have been familiar with. The root meaning of Halakha is 'the way to walk or go', and comprised of rulings about daily life derived from the written law or Torah and from the tradition of rabbinic interpretation. There were great variations in Halakha applications which were sought when there appeared to be conflicting commands or when there was no explicit law for a particular situation. Because of the dynamic nature of these variations (which were as diverse as the number of rabbis) Jews tended to follow the Halakha of a particular rabbi. In this rabbinic tradition, to bind was to forbid something and to loose was to allow it.

Two things would have stood out to Jesus' hearers. First, that a practice reserved for rabbis was now being assigned (corporately) to the community of Jesus' disciples (Yoder 1985:213). This would have scandalized the religious authorities who claimed exclusive authority in such matters. Second, that the authority for engaging in this practice, far from being vested in a particular disciple or religious entity, resided in Jesus himself (Matt. 18:20). Read alongside Matthew 16:13-19 where Peter's authority to bind and loose is

derived from his confession of (and hence submission to) Jesus as the Messiah and Son of the living God, this signals that the disciples would make decisions which would regulate and guide the life of the new community, under the authority of Jesus and guided by his memory and spirit (cf. John 16:5-15).

The events recorded in Acts 15:28-29 illustrate how this binding and loosing practice was outworked in the early church. When questions of practice arose, there was prayerful, communal discernment which led them to free (or loose) Gentile believers to remain uncircumcised, while forbidding (binding) other practices, such as abstaining from idol food and bloodshed. This communal practice brought them both confidence and clarity, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:29).

Yoder (1985) suggests that there are two dimensions of meaning for binding and loosing . The first is forgiveness: in the sense of the communal decision to withhold fellowship (bind) or to forgive (loose). The second, and in line with rabbinical practice as outlined above, is the community's discernment around the moral requirements of the situation such that to bind was to prohibit or obligate and to loose was to allow. Clearly Yoder's first aspect of meaning is only possible on the basis of the second.

I would however, nuance Yoder's first aspect of meaning slightly differently. The communal decision is not so much a decision to exclude or withhold fellowship from an offender as it is to clarify and ratify the basis for belonging and inclusion . The onus is then clearly on the offender to choose to belong by virtue of their actions, or to exclude themselves by failing to live as one who belongs. This shifts the focus of this activity of binding and loosing

from a punitive action to one that clarifies the community's identity and as such frees its members to pursue reconciliation unencumbered by judgemental or punitive motives. Carter (2004) would seem to concur in suggesting that what is ratified is not the permanent exclusion of the offender, but rather the difficult task of restoration. Marshall (2001) sees implications well beyond church discipline,

> … when seen as the heart of the entire subsection of Matthew's narrative, the saying can be applied to every aspect of discipleship discussed in the larger context. All actions of disciples should be characterized by an agreement between heaven and earth - that is, by an effort to act on earth in a way that corresponds to God's will in heaven (2001:160).

Marshall's observation highlights the fact that this binding and loosing is nothing less than a dynamic interaction and agreement between earth and heaven and is at the very heart of what it means to be the church. This notion is supported by the early Anabaptist theologian, Balthasar Hubmaier, who saw baptism as the believers' commitment to both submit to and engage in this communal responsibility of binding and loosing (Yoder 1985:222). Moreover, Jesus' promise to be present whenever two or three gather for the purposes of binding and loosing (discernment, forgiveness, and reconciliation) places the authority for engaging in this practice firmly in Jesus himself. Any claims to disciplinary authority will only be valid to the extent that the people claiming it have submitted themselves to Jesus and one another in a community of loving discernment. Finally, the fact that this practice of discernment is set in the context of seeking out a fellow believer because of a perceived offence, adds weight to the appropriateness of using the Matthew 18 process in conflict situations rather than restricting it to cases of overt sin in the community.

How then are we to understand Matthew 18: 15-20 as a guideline for contemporary congregations? It is best understood as a whole unit, as the outworking of a commitment to reconciliation and restoration whenever relationships have been fractured. It is also best understood in the context of a search for a straying sheep where the driving motivation is to restore them to the fold: the search begins with an individual approach to the stray and culminates in an enlisting of communal help in binding and loosing (Marshall 2001). Each step needs to be worked through sequentially so that the integrity of both parties is safeguarded.

It is also clear that the process has the potential to transform both parties in a conflict. This transformation is personal in that engagement in the process requires self reflection for both parties. However, it is much farther reaching than purely personal change. Whenever believers engage in this process and experience the gift of personal transformation and relational reconciliation, they can dare to believe that this is possible for others also and be willing to take the risks involved in being a peacemaker. Hence this "transforming initiative" (the practice of Matt. 18:15-20) has an ultimate purpose in view: the fulfilment of the mandate to participate in God's ministry of reconciliation in the world (2 Cor. 17-20). As such, it is an essential mark of the church.

While the church as a whole is to be characterized by a commitment to reconciliation, the responsibility for engaging in this process belongs to members individually. In much the same way as Jesus' response to the question "who is my neighbour?"(Luke 10:25-37), the answer to the question of just who one should seek out is essentially whoever is in need of one's mercy and forgiveness. This also applies to the question of when one should pursue a

straying fellow believer: one should pursue whoever one knows is in danger of straying away from the community of faith. The process is relentlessly directed *toward* the offender, and at no point does it allow for turning one's back to those who have strayed.

This has radical, counter cultural implications for community life. In a contemporary culture dominated by "boundaries" the tendency can be to "back off" situations of conflict or wrongdoing and leave serious interventions to ministry professionals. This has a dual effect: individuals become less practised at speaking into one another's lives in appropriate ways on the one hand,[16] while the responsibility borne by those deemed "officially responsible" becomes greater than it could or should be. Moreover, an individual's failure to embrace Jesus' transforming initiative opens up the possibility that any minor congregational disagreement spirals into disproportionately destructive conflict. In addition, the individuals concerned are robbed of the transforming possibilities embedded in the process, and incur the risk that their fellow believer may be lost forever from the community.

Finally, while steps one and two are readily carried out in most contexts, the third step remains ambiguous. Involving some kind of communal censure, it requires all the wisdom and discernment implicit in the binding and loosing

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[16] Stanley Hauerwas highlights the broader importance of practising peacemaking and resolving differences within congregations:

"Peacemaking as a virtue is an act of imagination built on long habits of the resolution of differences. The great problem in the world is that our imagination has been stilled, since it has not made a practice of confronting wrongs so that violence might be avoided. In truth, we must say that the church has too often failed the world by its failure to witness in our own life the kind of conflict necessary to be a community of peace. Without an example of a peacemaking community, the world has no alternative but to use violence as a means to settle disputes." Hauerwas, S. (2001). Peacemaking: The Virtue of the Church (1985). The Hauerwas Reader/Stanley Hauerwas. J. Berkman and M. Cartwright. Durham and London, Duke University Press.: 318-326.

practice to facilitate an outcome appropriate for that community of faith. The ambiguity in this step mirrors that in the first where the exact nature of the "sin" is unclear, ensuring the focus is first and foremost on the relationships which have been damaged, and thus preventing any objectification of the perceived offender. The motivation for engaging in the process is that "not one should be lost" (Matt. 18:14). Regardless of the outcome of the third step and in light of the parable which follows (Matt. 18: 23-35), the process cannot be said to be complete until such time as the relationship is reconciled and the offender restored to fellowship once more. In other words, far from being a "quick fix" for conflict, this process, if properly understood, requires a steadfast commitment for the long haul while paying attention to the disciplines needed to sustain such a commitment. In the parable of the unforgiving servant, Jesus expands on what is required.

d. The imperative to forgive in the parable of the unforgiving servant

The rest of chapter 18 reinforces the fact that the primary way the community of disciples sustains itself is through a steadfast commitment to forgiveness and reconciliation. Having heard about the process for restoring a straying one back to fellowship in Matthew 18:15-20, Peter piously asks for clarification: "if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" (18:21). The rabbis of the day only required three times as sufficient for the same sin (Hagner 1995).

Jesus' response again contrasts the kingdom of heaven with accepted practice. He tells the story of a king's extravagant grace and forgiveness, the recipient's ungracious and unforgiving response to a fellow servant, and the

king's subsequent judgement. This story not only stresses God's immeasurable grace but also Jesus' expectation that his followers would reflect God in their boundless forgiveness of one another.

The servant's original debt was outrageous and completely unpayable. The debt could be the equivalent of hundreds of billions of dollars today: Jesus uses hyperbole to underscore his point (Wilkins 2004). The servant's claim to repay the money was laughable, and the punishment did not begin to redress the scope of the debt (although it would have been in keeping with accepted practice at that time). The king's deep compassion is mocked when the forgiven one fails to forgive the miniscule debt of a fellow servant. Like the original question, "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?", Peter's question, "how many times should I forgive my brother?" betrays the fact that he has yet to grasp the implications of belonging to the kingdom of heaven.

Only someone who has deeply mourned their own propensity for enmity toward God and others and received God's forgiveness with profound gratitude can genuinely initiate forgiveness toward their offender. Miroslav Volf (2006) unpacks this idea further:

> If I am united with Christ in faith, I'll have forgiveness and Christ will live in me, forgiving through me those who offend me as he has forgiven me. If, rather than being troubled by my inability to forgive, I don't want to forgive, there is a good chance that I haven't in fact received forgiveness from God, even if I believe that I have (2006:156).

It would seem the unforgiving servant's original show of repentance was just that, betraying a lack of awareness of the enormity of his debt. His ability to genuinely receive the king's forgiveness was jeopardised, and his lack of gratitude showed up in his immediate maltreatment of his fellow servant (Matt. 18:28). Hence the king's final response (Matt. 18:34), and Jesus' warning that

God would do the same (Matt. 18:35), is merely confirmation of the choice already made by the servant's unwillingness to repent.

This story highlights Jesus' expectation that his followers would be steadfast in their willingness to forgive, regardless of the offender's response. This willingness to forgive depends not on what the offender does or fails to do, but on what God has already done. Ultimately, a disciple can only be responsible for his or her own posture toward the offender. They cannot be responsible for the offender's repentance or lack of it, or for their failure to accept the forgiveness offered. However, it should be noted that a failure to repent could be linked to the failure of the offended party to give the perceived offender an opportunity to hear about the effects of their actions and to ask for forgiveness. At this point engagement with the process in Matthew 18:15-20 is a matter of acting justly toward the offender.

On the other hand, there remains the question of what to do with someone who cannot see their offence or accept responsibility for damaging a relationship. At this point the process outlined in Matthew 18:15-20 itself can help both parties along the path to self discovery and transformation. In other words, lack of engagement by one party and/or failure to achieve reconciliation need not preclude transformation in the other.

There is always the risk that the process will not result in reconciliation. One of the reasons why many Christians today fail to take this teaching seriously is because they realize that the process has no guarantee of "working". In a culture that minimizes risk and values pragmatism and effectiveness, it is not surprising that many look around for extra-biblical

alternatives. But Jesus is unequivocal here: his followers are to maintain their commitment to forgive and be reconciled, not because the offender repents, but because they have received forgiveness from God themselves and are to be generous in their forgiveness of others in response. Hence, forgiveness is much more than an event: it is an ongoing choice, an all-encompassing posture for living. Finally, the role of gratitude in one's capacity to forgive is implicit in this story (Matt. 18:32f). Gratitude is both rooted in and gives rise to the kind of humility that has a clear-eyed sense of place relative to others. This is the same humility Jesus refers to at the start of Matthew 18. This connection between humility, gratitude and forgiveness is also made explicit by the apostle Paul (Colossians 3:12-17). Seen in this light, gratitude becomes a spiritual discipline which supports the believer's commitment to live in the way of forgiveness.

Conclusion

Just what does Matthew 18 contribute to the search for a biblical understanding of congregational conflict and what might be expected of Christians who find themselves embroiled in it?

First, it is vital that Jesus' specific instructions in verses Matthew 18: 15-20 are not cut adrift from their context. Jesus' teaching is embedded in images (children and stumbling blocks) and parables (the straying sheep and the unforgiving servant) which vividly portray the posture or disposition expected of his followers. Conflict and sin inevitably are an ongoing part of community life, and there will be challenges from both within and without. The very survival of the community will depend on its members' commitment to sustain one another through genuine humility, self-discipline, respect and loving concern for other

members, and an unflinching commitment to forgive, and go on forgiving, with the same steadfastness as their Father in heaven forgave and continues to forgive them.

Second, and interplaying strongly with the posture outlined above, Matthew 18:15-20, far from being a punitive procedure for "dealing with" sin and conflict, are a vehicle for personal and communal transformation. Respectful truth telling, risky vulnerability, and corporate discernment prove transformative when carried out in the presence and under the authority of Jesus , and in the enabling of his Spirit. The overriding focus of the process is not on discerning the justification for a person's exclusion from the community of believers, but on clarifying the basis for inclusion, against which the offender must measure their behaviour. It is as each member engages in this process that humility, identity, and the commitment to forgiveness as a way of life continue to grow and in turn enhance the community's capacity to deal with conflict next time it arises. This process is not prescriptive procedure but transforming initiative.

Third, the stakes are high. The integrity of the community of faith hangs in the balance when conflict and sin are present. Will the forgiving and reconciling King be mocked by his own people's failure to live in that forgiveness? How the believers concerned respond will affect that community's witness and viability. Furthermore, there are no guarantees,[17] other than Jesus'

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[17] If the process does not "work" there are two common responses. 1. Self failure and doubt: "I'm no good at this peacemaking stuff, I got it wrong that's why it didn't result in reconciliation". A common response is then to "pass the buck" and expect someone else to play God in the situation and provide the magic solution. 2. God got it wrong, he was unable to reconcile. The response here, "If God can't do it through this Matthew 18 process, then I must take matters into my own hands, stop relying on God and play God myself". Either response is misplaced. Jesus counters both these responses by the promise to be fully present in a peacemaking situation on

promise to be fully present to guide and sustain wherever and whenever his followers gather in his name for the purposes of discernment and reconciliation (Matt.15:20). Jesus' expectation that his followers would go on forgiving and seeking reconciliation in spite of perceived failure shows that this process is not just a skill to be learned. It is a commitment resourced and sustained by a faith-filled and faithful life in Jesus Christ.

Finally, we began with the question: Is it valid to use Matthew 18 as the primary model for managing congregational conflict? The answer must be an unequivocal "yes" for the following reasons.

To begin with, the focus of Matthew 18 is not on procedure but on posture and process. Jesus' teaching cuts through the disciples' questions about status, authority and structure, as well as putting the question of holding an essentially voluntary association together, in proper perspective. The community is held together not by rules and regulations, but by its members' commitment to one another in the spirit of Jesus. Moreover, the call to forgive is to individual members of the Christian community, across denominations and sub-groupings, wherever believers are in relationship with one another. In addition, Jesus' teaching shows that, when faced with questions of how to deal with conflict in the church today, the answers lie primarily in building cultures of peace and reconciliation. Matthew 18, read as a whole, provides the vehicle and the content for developing and sustaining such a culture.

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the one hand and the challenge to go on forgiving and seeking reconciliation in spite of perceived failure on the other.

Matthew 18 shows that ultimately, the health and viability of the community will be determined by the formation and transformation of its members as they interact with one another, especially in times of conflict. Jesus urges his followers individually to embody the same concern God has for others as the primary way of corporately sustaining their ongoing discipleship. Far from being harsh or judgemental, following up on perceived sin or offence is an integral part of loving one another, and also one way God builds humility and transforms his church (Matt. 18:2-3).

So we return to the questions raised by the participant in my seminar. When read in the context of the whole of Matthew 18, the steps Jesus outlines in Matthew 18: 15-20 are neither harsh nor designed to peremptorily exclude erring believers from the community. Moreover, the qualities of humility, caring accountability, discernment and forgiveness Jesus expects in Matthew 18 are consistent with the teaching of Jesus elsewhere in the Gospels. They are also congruent with the teachings of the Old Testament prophets. In Matthew 18 Jesus echoes the qualities God required of his people in Micah 6:8 : to act justly, to love kindness and mercy, and to walk humbly with God. Matthew 18: 15-20 provides the vehicle needed both to grow and to be sustained in the commitment to these qualities.

In the conversation about how best to manage congregational conflict, Matthew 18 gathers up both individual and communal concerns and provides not only a process for engaging the issues but also the spiritual disciplines needed to sustain the often arduous journey toward reconciliation. As such Matthew 18 functions less as a contingency plan for conflict situations, and more as a blue print for everyday engagement within the community of

disciples. It is less a skill to be mastered, and more a way of life to be embraced. This way of life not only facilitates the restoration of sinners, but also holds everything necessary to maintain unity in the midst of diversity.

Chapter 3: Conflict Resolution or Conflict Transformation?

Introduction

New Zealand churches tend towards one of two poles when dealing with conflict. [18] One pole involves turning to the Bible in the search for answers and applies passages on conflict literally, seeking to do what is "right". As the seminar participant I mentioned in the previous chapter demonstrated, this approach may read Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:15-17 as a peremptory "three strikes and you're out" process. The resulting hurt, offence and alienation can leave those involved feeling mystified and disappointed that "the biblical way" has failed to deliver a resolution. The other pole looks to largely secular disciplines of conflict management and resolution and deals to the issues in a legally tidy manner but fails to address the peculiarly spiritual and relational aspects of congregational conflict, let alone satisfy the biblical imperatives to forgive and be reconciled. It is not uncommon for churches in conflict to begin with a "biblical" response, and move on to a more secular approach when the initial response fails to resolve the conflict. These approaches have one thing in common: both tend to focus on issues or positions and in so doing miss the opportunities for personal and situational transformation that conflict presents. Furthermore, both approaches struggle to integrate theology with practice,

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[18] I say New Zealand churches because churches in the USA seem to have much more developed and robust processes for addressing congregational conflict. Institutions like the Alban Institute (which has adapted conflict management approaches for congregational use), the JUSTPEACE Centre for Mediation and Conflict Transformation (which is developing faith-based conflict transformation practices), and the Lombard Mennonite Peace Centre, to name a few, have done much towards resourcing congregations in this area. In Australasia however, resources are few. Other than PeaceWise (Australia) and Resolve (NZ) which adapt materials from Ken Sande's work in the USA, I am unaware of any other organisations which exist specifically to resource congregations in conflict.

tending to focus on one to the detriment of the other at best, or to the exclusion of the other at worst. [19] Either way, confusion, frustration, hopelessness and disillusionment with the church easily set in.

In this chapter I will contrast conflict *transformation* theory with other conflict *resolution* approaches. The question I want to consider is: in the quest for a model suited to congregational conflict, what does conflict transformation offer? And, in what ways does this improve on prevailing conflict resolution practices? I will show why conflict transformation approaches are best suited to communal and interpersonal conflicts in preparation for a mutually enriching conversation between conflict transformation theory and Jesus' teaching on conflict (in Matthew 18) in the final chapter of this thesis.

1. Tracing and locating the terminology

Any discussion of conflict management theories must acknowledge that the terminology itself reflects the ideological shifts that have occurred as this discipline has developed (Lederach 1995). What is needed is not only an awareness of the terminology, but more importantly, of the underlying ideologies of different approaches to conflict. Schellenberg states that "we tend to approach the subject of conflict not just in a factual manner, but also with strong philosophical assumptions" (Schellenberg 1996:5). The term "conflict management" itself reflects a shift in the field of dispute resolution. Tracking this

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[19] For example, Canon 1, Title D, the disciplinary standard of the Canons of the Anglican Diocese of Wellington. In this legally couched 28 page document, the word "reconciliation" occurs only 3 times in the earlier parts of Title D. The focus of this document is almost entirely procedural and legal, with no explicit theological frame of reference for the procedures required.

shift will help clarify both the terminology and the ideology underlying each approach as well as locating the processes each employs.

Up until the late 1960's disputes tended to be settled within the adversarial legal court system. This was not only time consuming and expensive, but it produced winners and losers and mostly failed to address the underlying causes of disputes. Contested resources were distributed on the basis of rights and rules, and decisions were made hierarchically. Individual needs were subsumed under the greater good of society (Bush and Folger 1994). Hence Alternative Dispute Resolution arose as a response to not only court overcrowding but the need for deeper satisfaction of disputing parties. This shift reflected trends in Western society as a whole. It was a time of questioning received hierarchically imposed views, and an increasing focus on the individual as autonomous and self-determining. Not surprisingly, the terminology began to change.

The narrow focus on disputes was broadened to include more complex and prolonged conflicts which required resolution rather than settlement. This shift toward conflict resolution (with its accompanying deeper understanding of the dynamics of conflict) within an increasingly individualistic society spawned a range of practices designed to respect the individual's capacity for self-determination. Interest-based mediation, conciliation, and facilitation by a neutral third party provided not only an alternative to adjudication of formal disputes, but allowed for conflict resolution to be practiced in communities, families, and workplaces as well as between individuals.

In group settings, practitioners developed processes to minimize the damage and reduce the level of conflict, aiming for conflict management rather than resolution, especially of long term multi-party conflicts. By the 1980's the practice of collaborative mediation emerged as a major player in the field of conflict resolution. Collaborative mediation aimed not for "resolution but consensus, recognition of the other party's views, and negotiated future procedures for addressing issues" (Claremont and Davies 2005:19). This apparently subtle shift from resolving a problem to getting parties to work together in order to address a problem, allied with the changes occurring in Western society at the time, paved the way for a radically different conflict management approach to emerge.

The late 1980's saw increasing signs of what many identify as a major paradigm or worldview shift in Western society. Self-absorbed individualism had failed to deliver a better society. The challenges of an individually articulated and mediated morality became evident in events such as the 1999 Columbine High School shootings and were experienced in tangible localized ways. On the world canvas widespread famine, war crimes and climate change produced a growing awareness of humanity as inter-related and connected. The emergence of post-modernism signalled a shift from an individualistic to a relational worldview (Bush and Folger 1994).

Not surprisingly, this shift to a more relational worldview was mirrored in the field of mediation and conflict studies. Robert Baruch Bush and Joseph Folger's seminal work, *The Promise of Mediation* (1994), signalled not only a fresh approach to mediation practice, but a major paradigm shift in the field of

conflict resolution.[20] Rather than adding to the arsenal of problem-solving options, Bush and Folger advocated a completely new aim for mediation practice: personal growth and transformation of the parties involved in conflict.

Simultaneously with Bush and Folger's new approach, and yet quite independently, John Paul Lederach was articulating a fresh approach to dealing with international conflicts: conflict transformation. Where Bush and Folger's model grew out of interpersonal mediation, Lederach's approach was birthed in the context of inter-communal conflicts. Not surprisingly, Lederach's model concerns itself not only with individual transformation (as Bush and Folger's approach does), but specifically addresses the relationships and structures within which the conflict arose.

We cannot conclude our discussion of the evolving terminology in the field of conflict resolution without locating John Winslade and Gerald Monk's (2000) work on narrative mediation. Winslade and Monk's narrative approach to mediation, like Bush and Folger's transformative approach, was birthed in the context of interpersonal mediation rather than international relations. Unlike Bush and Folger, who focus primarily on the individual's transformation through empowerment and recognition, Winslade and Monk look to the metaphor of story or narrative to inform and drive the mediation process. This sits compatibly with Lederach's focus on the relationships and structures represented in and by the conflict. In common with both transformative mediation and conflict

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[20] The shift to a Relational Paradigm or worldview in Western society, reflected in Bush and Folger's integration of both individual and relational concerns, was similarly outworked by moral theorists, sociologists, legal scholars, theologians and medical scientists. For a useful discussion see: Bush, R. A. B. and J. P. Folger (1994). The Promise of Mediation: Responding to Conflict Through Empowerment and Recognition. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers. Chapter 9.

transformation, narrative mediation signals a departure from problem-solving or interest-based approaches, and reflects a relational worldview.

Having located the terminology within its underlying philosophies or world views, I will now take a closer look at the three main approaches to dealing with conflict that naturally fall out of our discussion to this point.

2.   Adversarial Approaches to Conflict

Adversarial approaches to conflict pitch conflicted parties against each other in a contest for what are seen as fixed or limited entitlements. These entitlements are largely determined by a higher authority than the parties represented, and allocated to the disputants by recognized experts in the field concerned. Decisions are made on the strengths of the case put forward by each side of the dispute. In the legal or court system for example, entitlements are determined by the laws of the state, a case is argued on behalf of the disputants by their respective lawyers, and a binding decision is handed down by a judge who has weighed the evidence.

Similarly, arbitration is an out of court process where disputing parties agree to abide by the decision of a third party. Each side presents their case to a third party, who is knowledgeable in the field the dispute is in, and a binding decision is made independently of the parties involved.

It is clear that in situations where criminal or civil laws have been breached, there is an ongoing need for the court system as we know it. Nonetheless, not only is it clear that this model is only necessary for a relatively small number of disputes or conflicts, but it can be argued that it is potentially

damaging for the individuals or communities involved in a majority of cases. The problem with this model is that it focuses almost entirely on the presenting issues, aiming to dispose of the conflict rather than addressing it. In so doing it fails to address the underlying causes of the conflict as well as the relational dynamics surrounding it. In other words, it contributes almost nothing either to breaking cycles of destructive conflict or toward equipping people to better address future conflicts. It also necessarily produces winners and losers.

This dynamic of winners and losers is a defining characteristic of adversarial processes. Any process utilised to settle disagreements can be said to be adversarial, if it results in winners and losers. And wherever there are winners and losers, the resulting dynamics of competition and "otherness" inevitably resurface in future discussions or disagreements.

Congregational and denominational disciplinary processes can likewise be adversarial. They are often modelled on the court system,[21] and can be just as damaging to the individuals involved. The need to argue a case leads to selective truth telling at best, and a perverting or twisting of the truth at worst. Moreover, the energies of the adjudicator or arbitrator are directed almost entirely toward uncovering the truth of the situation in order to reach an outcome which faithfully applies the rules and regulations governing the particular situation. This focus on debating the issues on the one hand, and uncovering the truth on the other, largely precludes paying attention to the

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[21] Canon 1, Title D of the Canons of the Anglican Diocese of Wellington is a good example of a disciplinary procedure which functions as a court of the Diocese for disputes, accusations and misconduct of clergy and licensed lay ministers.

relational aspects of the conflict. Thomas Porter, an experienced lawyer and

churchman in the USA, highlights the limitations of adversarial systems:

> As a minister, I have experienced the adversarial retributive model in conflicts within the church .. I began to see the adversarial retributive system of our courtrooms as the model for most of our dealings with differences, conflict, and harm. In my experience, this system does not restore relationships, develop community, or encourage the telling of the truth, especially the truth that heals. In fact, I have seen how destructive this system can be (Porter 2010:2).

Another limitation of adversarial approaches to conflict is their reliance on

experts who are authorized to adjudicate. As we noted in our earlier discussion

of terminology, this often proves both time consuming and expensive. This

reliance on experts can also be profoundly disempowering of the parties

involved in the dispute: they have no say in the process, and negligible input

into the outcomes because these are both governed by higher authorities or

statutes. This results in disputants having little sense of personal ownership or

commitment to the implementation of what is required of them. It also means

disputants have little sense of their own capacity to deal with conflict or

otherwise, and are more likely to rely on outside intervention in the future.

The disempowerment of the people involved in the conflict (and

interestingly this applies to both the winners and the losers in a dispute) brings

us to a final observation about adversarial approaches to conflict. The needs

and interests of the individuals involved are subsumed in the interests of

maintaining the greater good. So when a conflict of interests arises, the only

available option is to capitulate to the outcome which will benefit the greatest

number of people. Outcomes are seen in either/or terms, which not only narrow

resolution possibilities, but also force people to take up defensive positions in

relation to the conflict. Energies are deployed in the defence of one's position, rather than engaged in seeking not only understanding of the opposing view, but in forging constructive solutions.

To summarize, adversarial approaches to conflict have the advantage of producing conclusive and clear settlement of disputes. They also function as a safeguard for the greater good of society, or the groups concerned. However, while the greater good may appear to be gained in the short term (through the cessation of destructive conflict), these processes largely fail to address the underlying causes of disputes and can thereby contribute to ongoing cycles of conflict. The relationships affected by a conflict are largely overlooked in the push toward solving the presenting problems. Finally, the inevitable creation of winners and losers in this approach leads to defensiveness and relational animosity between disputants regardless of whether they are individuals or groups. The limitations of adversarial approaches outlined here became the catalyst for the development of alternative conflict resolution approaches which have much broader application in society.

3.   Conflict Resolution

The field of conflict resolution arose in the 1970's as a response to the limitations of the adversarial approaches outlined above. Conflict resolution goes well beyond adjudication's settlement approach, or even negotiation's distributive approach (which is still adversarial inasmuch as it aims to get as much as possible out of the opposing party). Where adversarial approaches seek to protect the greater good, the more collaborative resolution approaches

aim to achieve maximum satisfaction for the individuals concerned, while seeking to improve the situations which gave rise to the conflict. Hence, the catch phrase shifts from the adversarial "win-lose" to the collaborative "win-win". Where adjudication and arbitration consign disputing parties to two opposing tables before an objective and determinative third party, conflict resolution brings disputants together at a single table to address a common issue (Porter 2010). This commitment to seek a "win-win" resolution which addresses the presenting issues as well as the underlying causes of a dispute necessarily acknowledges the complex nature of conflict.

This recognition of the complexity of conflict makes way for a range of practices aimed at valuing and enhancing the individual's capacity for self-determination. For example, at different stages of the process a collaborative approach to conflict resolution might employ practices such as information gathering and giving, negotiation, mediation, conciliation, facilitation, and joint problem solving. And, because of its interest in supporting the parties' ongoing capacity for addressing conflict, this approach (unlike an adversarial one) will often also include some form of training and input from other areas of expertise (Claremont and Davies 2005). The range of processes employed is usually shaped by the scope of the conflict itself. In other words, unlike the prescriptive and determinative nature of adversarial approaches, collaborative approaches are both responsive and flexible. This flexibility broadens the range of possible solutions to the problem and allows for greater creativity in their application. Furthermore, the parties' active involvement in framing resolutions produces a greater sense of ownership of the outcomes and thereby increases the likelihood of compliance.

In addition to framing their own resolutions, the parties are necessarily involved in defining the issues from the outset because this approach views conflict as the result of unsatisfied needs,

> when a conflict exists, a problem exists, and a problem exists because of a real or apparent incompatibility of parties' needs or interests..the ideal response to conflict is taking collaborative steps to solve identified problems. Addressing conflicts means finding solutions that meet the needs of all involved parties to the greatest possible degree, and thus maximizing joint satisfaction (Bush and Folger 1994:56).

Hence resolution must go deeper than the presenting issues, and search out the underlying competing needs which led to the conflict, before formulating a solution. This focus on individual needs represents a radical departure from the adversarial approach, where the conflict is framed in terms of entitlements governed by rules and where the aim is to settle the dispute as fast as possible.

Furthermore, the commitment to enhancing the individuals' capacity for self-determination radically changes the role of the third party. The third party functions as a neutral mediator who facilitates collaboration between disputing parties, who are encouraged to not only define their own problems, but to find their own solutions also. This allows for the possibility that, in complex or prolonged conflict situations, management or reduction of the conflict may be a mutually acceptable outcome (Schellenberg 1996). Once again, this signals a quantum shift from an adversarial approach. The third party is no longer a determinative and objective enforcer of an externally imposed standard, but rather a neutral facilitator and mediator who focuses, not on the letter of the law, but on the personal needs of the individuals caught up in the dispute. The mediator in a resolution approach must hear the parties' concerns, help them identify their interests and needs, and then reframe those needs as problems to

which mutually satisfying solutions must be found. The movement is from the presenting issues, to more complex underlying needs, to a rationalizing of those needs in order to reframe them as problems. Hence the presenting issues often morph into quite different problems by virtue of being modified and clarified by the intervening process. Resolutions are then focussed on addressing the root causes of the conflict as opposed to the mere symptoms of it.

Collaborative mediation's commitment to finding the underlying causes of a conflict and seeking resolutions that satisfy the needs of both/all parties make it a real improvement on the adversarial approaches outlined earlier. A resolution approach fosters greater self awareness in the parties involved, empowers them to find healthier ways to address their conflicts, and delivers more creative and enduring solutions than adversarial approaches do. Its collaborative focus can also address power imbalances and reduce the possibility of manoeuvring between the parties (Bush and Folger 1994:15). These strengths make collaborative mediation the most commonly taught and practiced form of conflict resolution today. Nevertheless, this approach is not without its weaknesses.

Collaborative mediation seeks the resolution of conflict through a reframing of the problem in terms of unmet individual needs, in order to arrive at a "mutually satisfying solution". This drive toward a settlement, albeit a collaborative one, significantly shapes the disputants' level of engagement in the mediation process. As Mayer (2000) observes, mediation often overlooks the cognitive and emotional dimensions of the conflict and its resolution. So, while disputants may want a fuller solution, they largely find it easier to focus on the more tangible aspects of the conflict, and opt for shallow resolutions. Unless

the mediator moves the discussion beyond the behavioural issues, and invites engagement with the cognitive and emotional dynamics at play, this approach can be as upsetting and alienating as the adversarial processes but without the procedural safeguards. So, while the problem might be seen to be resolved, and a working relationship restored, the emotional damage remains unaddressed. The resulting emotional rift leaves open the possibility of conflict recurring in the future around a different set of "incompatible needs".

In summary, the advent of collaborative mediation as an alternative to adversarial dispute resolution signalled a radical shift in how conflict was both understood and addressed. Conflict was identified as the result of incompatible needs and interests between the disputing parties. This approach therefore aimed at the parties not only defining their own problems, but shaping their own solutions in collaboration with one another. Hence, the role of the third party shifted from that of adjudicator of an external standard, to a neutral mediator who facilitates the collaborative process in order to arrive at a "win-win" solution. However, in spite of the significant differences between the adversarial (dispute resolution) and collaborative (conflict resolution) approaches, they are both essentially problem focussed and settlement driven. This focus generally precludes the possibility of addressing the emotional dis-ease or enmity commonly created by conflict, and leads more commonly to "a shaky truce between enemies" (Bush and Folger 1994:21), than to a genuinely transformed relationship. It was an awareness of this "gap" which led to the articulation of a whole new way of seeing and understanding both the dynamics and possibilities of conflict situations.

4. Conflict transformation

The field of conflict transformation, in its broadest sense, encompasses three strands. Bush and Folger's transformative mediation, Lederach's conflict transformation, and Winslade and Monk's narrative mediation. Here I will compare and contrast these three approaches and argue for Lederach's broader approach as the most appropriate for a congregational setting.

a. Transformative mediation

Where earlier adversarial approaches to conflict reflected a bias towards the greater good of society and later conflict resolution practices focussed on the individual as central, Bush and Folger's (1994) transformative mediation incorporated both in its commitment to personal empowerment and compassionate recognition of others. Where collaborative mediation processes aim to create a better society by improving individuals' personal satisfaction and reducing the suffering produced by conflict, transformative mediation posits that a better society can only be possible as individuals themselves are transformed and grow in moral maturity. Hence Bush and Folger's work is a departure from pragmatic settlement-driven mediation to a more ideological and values driven mode (Rubin in Bush and Folger 1994).

> … the view that fostering moral growth should be a primary goal of social processes like mediation rests on a belief, grounded in what can be called a Relational vision of human life, that compassionate strength (moral maturity) embodies an intrinsic goodness inherent in human beings. Bringing out that goodness is itself a supremely important human enterprise, because it is the surest if not the only way to produce a truly decent society and because it embodies and expresses the highest and best within us as human beings (Bush and Folger 1994:83).

Bush and Folger focus on the individuals involved and on how a particular conflict situation may be harnessed for greater empowerment and recognition.

So any given conflict is viewed as merely an instrument in the quest for moral maturity, and the mediator as the primary agent for facilitating such personal transformation. Conflict is an opportunity for personal growth in two areas. First, for strengthening the self (empowerment) "through realizing and strengthening one's inherent human capacity for dealing with difficulties by engaging in conscious and deliberate reflection, choice and action"(Bush and Folger 1994:81). Secondly, for strengthening one's capacity to reach out to others with compassion, especially those from whom one differs (recognition). While the conflict may itself be resolved as a result of the individuals' strengthening in these two areas, success of the mediation process is measured in terms of empowerment and recognition rather than on whether the conflict was resolved. Hence, the time frame for transformative mediation is necessarily long term in its ultimate aim, while being content to celebrate even small steps towards this aim of personal change.

Bush and Folger's "transformative mediation" emphasizes the primary role of the mediator as well as the focus of the transformation which is on the individuals involved. The content of the conflict and its root causes are secondary, and necessarily remain in the background during the mediation process. As mentioned earlier, conflict is viewed as an opportunity for personal growth.

b. Conflict transformation in contrast to transformative mediation

Conversely, Lederach's term, "conflict transformation", expresses what

he calls the "dialectic nature" of conflict (Lederach 1995).[22] This term captures

the reality that conflict, as a natural part of all relationships, effects change

within the people and relationships involved, whilst opening up the possibility

that a conflict itself might be transformed to be a catalyst for positive rather than

negative personal, relational and societal change.

> ... conflict can have destructive consequences. However, the
> consequences can be modified or transformed so that self-images,
> relationships, and social structures improve as a result of conflict instead
> of being harmed by it. Usually this involves transforming perceptions of
> issues, actions, and other people or groups (Burgess 1997:1).

> Conflict is never a static phenomenon. It is expressive, dynamic, and
> dialectical in nature. Relationally based, conflict is born in the world of
> human meaning and perception. It is constantly changed by ongoing
> human interaction, and it continuously changes the very people who give
> it life and the social environment in which it is born, evolves, and perhaps
> ends (Lederach 1997:63-64).

Hence, in contrast to Bush and Folger's relegation of the conflict to the

background, Lederach keeps the conflict in focus not only as a valuable source

of information, but as a powerful force for relational and societal change.

Clearly Bush and Folger's "transformative mediation" and Lederach's

"conflict transformation" emphasize not only differing catalysts for

transformation, but different foci. For the former, the *mediation process* is the

catalyst for personal transformation; while the latter would see the natural ebb

and flow of *conflict itself* as a catalyst for relational transformation. While the

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[22] This notion is shared by collaborative mediators who describe conflict as "… a dynamic or dialectic that exists within relationships. It cannot be separated from this relational sense." Claremont, R. and L. Davies (2005). Collaborative Conflict Management. Sydney, Lansdowne Publishing. p. 14.

former is focussed on personal growth (albeit in relationship to others), the latter

is relationship-centred and necessarily includes the systems in which the

conflicted relationships are embedded (Lederach 2003).

Furthermore, Bush and Folger (1994) see problem-solving/resolution

approaches and transformative mediation as mutually exclusive, arguing that,

while a transformative process may well result in resolution of the problem, the

reverse is not true[23]. Lederach's engagement with and in the conflict itself, on

the other hand, allows for a wide range of processes to be pressed into service

during different stages of the conflict while retaining clear relational priorities

throughout.

> We must conceptualize multiple change processes that address
> solutions for immediate problems and *at the same time* processes that
> create a platform for longer-term change of relational and structural
> patterns (Lederach 2003:38).

Clearly the different contexts of interpersonal mediation and complex inter-

communal conflict transformation at least partly explain their differing views on

the use of a variety of processes. However, the difference remains a significant

one because of its impact on how the conflict is viewed and then navigated.

These differences notwithstanding, the two approaches also exhibit striking

similarities.

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[23] Not all mediators would agree with Bush and Folger's exclusive perspective. Some mediators
would contend that the processes employed in any given conflict must be tailored to the needs
of the presenting situation. Seen in this way, transformative mediation represents just one of
several possible processes available. Mayer, B. (2000). The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution: A
Practitioner's Guide. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass. p. 110f.

c. Commonalities between conflict transformation and transformative mediation

Both conflict transformation and transformative mediation are concerned with process. The process is key in transformative mediation and it keeps the aim of personal transformation clearly in view. Likewise, the process is paramount in conflict transformation as the means through which to create and sustain the systems/structures in which relationships are embedded and which foster either constructive or destructive responses to change (which is inevitable and inextricably linked to conflict).

> … process matters more than outcome … At times of heated conflict too little attention is paid to how the issues are to be approached, discussed, and decided. There is a push toward solution and outcome that skips the discipline of creating an adequate and clear process for achieving an acceptable result. Process, it is argued, is the key to the Kingdom (Lederach 1995:22).

This leads us to another aspect of commonality: both models take a long term view. Both transformative mediation and conflict transformation see their respective involvements in a conflict as steps along a continuum. While one focuses more on the individual and the other on relational aspects, ultimately they both seek to make progress towards a more peaceable and healthy society.[24] A corollary of this is that both are prepared to sacrifice short term gains or "resolutions" in order to safeguard the longer term aim. For example, a transformative mediator might forego the possibility of an agreement where a person's growth in empowerment means they decide to pursue legal avenues for settlement (Bush and Folger 1994). Or when a conflict transformation

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[24] The same ultimate aim would be true for collaborative mediation. However, it is less central to the process and viewed more as a by-product than as a clear and immediate aim.

facilitator allows the escalation of conflict in order to pursue constructive change (Lederach 2003).

Furthermore, there are commonalities between Bush and Folger's empowerment and recognition, and some of the concepts outlined by Lederach (1995). Bush and Folger's concept of empowerment is echoed in Lederach's call for the empowerment of individuals to make things right. Similarly, Lederach's creating of opportunities for the acknowledgement of harm done fosters the recognition that Bush and Folger aim for (Burgess 1997).

To summarize, Bush and Folger's transformative mediation and Lederach's conflict transformation share a concern for the relational aspects of conflict. Both utilize processes which foster empowerment and recognition, and are prepared to sacrifice short term resolutions in the service of longer term transformational aims. However, while transformative mediation relegates the content of the conflict to the background in order to pursue personal growth priorities, conflict transformation engages the conflict fully, employing a range of processes in its effort to "end something destructive and build something desired" (Lederach 2003:33). This commitment to "end something destructive and build something desired" (Lederach 2003:33) is further developed in John Winslade and Gerald Monk's (2000) work on narrative mediation.

d. Narrative mediation

Winslade and Monk's narrative approach to mediation, like Bush and Folger's transformative approach, was birthed in the context of interpersonal mediation rather than international relations. Unlike Bush and Folger, who focus primarily on the individual's transformation through empowerment and

recognition, Winslade and Monk look to the metaphor of story or narrative to inform and drive the mediation process. This sits very compatibly with Lederach's focus on the relationships and structures represented in and by the conflict. In common with both transformative mediation and conflict transformation, narrative mediation signals a departure from problem-solving or interest-based approaches. So, what is narrative mediation, and in what ways does it enhance Lederach's conflict transformation approach?

Narrative mediation is rooted in a post-modern social-constructionist worldview. Winslade and Monk (2000) outline four features of this worldview. First, it is anti-essentialist and marks a departure from an individualist psychology which sees people as internally hardwired for certain needs, to asserting people's needs are constructed in conversation with others and externally "mapped" by their socio-cultural milieu. Secondly, it is anti-realist and asserts that knowledge can only ever be partial, being relative to time and place as well as the socio-cultural perspective which gave rise to it. Hence, the perspective from which something is viewed is just as important as the object itself. All facts serve particular interests by virtue of the assumptions which allow for privileging of particular aspects over others. So narrative mediation is not only concerned with the facts and interests which gave rise to the conflict, but in the historical and cultural dynamics which gave rise to those facts and interests. A corollary of this is that narrative mediators will be less concerned to clarify the facts of the conflict, than they will be to help the disputing parties to create an alternative story.

Thirdly, a post-modern social-constructionist worldview asserts that language is a precondition for thought. In other words, language "speaks" us

into existence and constitutes our personhood as much as we use it to

communicate with others (Winslade and Monk 2000). Furthermore, language

itself is developed not by the individual, but in relationship to others. Finally, this

view asserts that language is itself a form of social action by virtue of speaking

things into existence. The implications for mediation of these four characteristics

posit narrative mediation remarkably close to conflict transformation:

> …mediation is a site where social action is always taking place rather
> than just being talked about. It is where lives and relations are being
> produced and reproduced. It is where cultural stories are performed and
> enacted. It is also where social or institutional change can take place.
> Thought of in this way, mediation is more than just a place where
> particular interpersonal problems get resolved and some kind of social
> homeostasis gets restored. It is where we should take care to talk with an
> eye on the kind of world we are creating because we are already in the
> process of creating it (Winslade and Monk 2000:40-41).

Language, power, identity, story and conflict itself then are viewed as

hugely dynamic and capable of holding paradoxes and posing dilemmas which

open the way for innovative and creative alternatives to the presenting conflict.

In other words, the acknowledgement of the different stories at play within any

given conflict, alongside the notion that language has the power not only to

describe the conflict but to create new possibilities, means disputing parties can

discover that "things do not have to be this way" and forge new ways of relating.

> The task of mediation can be considered to be a teasing out of these
> stories in order to open up possibilities for alternative stories to gain an
> audience. Rather than searching for the one true story, the narrative
> mode of thinking welcomes the complexity of competing stories and
> numerous influential background stories. Out of this complexity can
> emerge a range of possible futures from which parties to a mediation can
> choose..useful for mediation because conflicts so often narrow the field
> of vision for protagonists. The subjunctive spirit opens people's thinking
> to the possibility that things can be different (Winslade and Monk
> 2000:53).

To conclude our exploration of narrative mediation, it is fair to assert that narrative mediation fits well within Lederach's broader conflict transformation approach. Its focus on story, history, culture and language allow for remarkably compatible views on the nature of conflict, identity, power, and complexity, and for people's capacity to get unstuck in the midst of conflict and forge sustainable and new ways of relating in the future.

e. Summary

I have outlined in broad strokes the ideological trends and shifts which have influenced the field of conflict resolution, and shown how the terminology employed has reflected these changes. However, it would be wrong to assume that the changes recorded chronologically are reflected in current practice. Adversarial (distributive) approaches to conflict are still utilized and indeed are required especially for conflicts or disputes with a criminal element. Likewise, Alternative Dispute Resolution practices such as conciliation and collaborative or interest-based mediation continue to be widely employed not only in the workplace, but in families and communities, as well as in international settings. As noted earlier, these are all essentially problem-solving approaches. One final rider is worth noting. While collaborative mediation remains a problem-solving approach, its concern for process and attention to people's values and interests, as well as its deeper understanding of the nature of conflict means it shares many characteristics with transformational approaches. The essential difference is one of focus.

In the discussion that follows I will examine the differences between problem-solving approaches and transformational models, and argue in favour

of Lederach's more inclusive transformational approach as the most helpful model for navigating congregational conflict.

5. "Where two or three agree": Conflict Resolution or Conflict Transformation?

As I have outlined above, the differences between resolution and transformation approaches to conflict are reflected in the terminology and the processes employed. In this section I will use the term "resolution" to include all problem-solving or settlement oriented approaches. The term "transformation" will denote Lederach's more inclusive approach on the assumption that Lederach's conflict transformation also incorporates Bush and Folger's more narrowly focussed concepts of empowerment and recognition and Winslade and Monk's more recent narrative mediation.

So, which model is best suited to congregational conflicts? Before answering this question, one must name the general nature of congregations from a sociological perspective. Christian congregations largely gather around doctrinal and ecclesiological concerns. However, at the most basic level, Christians see themselves as gathered around and in the person of Jesus Christ. Eschatological assertions mean the relationships are necessarily long term (no less than eternity!). Corporate and individual identity is rooted in an understanding of the family of God (which makes fellow Christians brothers and sisters) and the Kingdom of God (with individuals relating to each other as fellow citizens). Finally, historical and sociological dynamics account for a plethora of theological positions, ecclesiastical systems and modes of

governance. For our purposes it is enough to note that congregations, along with other communal groupings, are nested both historically and sociologically, so these are significant factors in determining what approach might be used in conflict situations. It is with these very broad assertions in mind that we return to the question at hand: Conflict resolution or conflict transformation?

a. View of conflict

The term, conflict resolution, itself implies that conflict is essentially negative:[25] conflict is undesirable, painful, and potentially damaging, so it needs to be ended or resolved. In complex conflicts, resolution approaches aim for de-escalation and containment of the conflict to manageable levels. Conflict is seen as an unwelcome interruption to peace, and peace itself as the absence of conflict.

Conflict transformation, on the other hand, sees conflict positively as "an opportunity to know" (Schrock-Shenk 1999:26), and views peace as not merely the absence of conflict, but as a tangible attainable entity in itself. As such conflict is a catalyst for growth at individual and communal levels, and can therefore be welcomed as gift:

> Conflict also creates life: through conflict we respond, innovate and change. Conflict can be understood as the motor of change, that which keeps relationships and social structures honest, alive, and dynamically responsive to human needs, aspirations, and growth (Lederach 2003:18).

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[25] Both Schellenberg (1996) and Mayer (2000) would agree that conflict functions as a life-shaping force and can therefore have positive outcomes. Yet on the whole, conflict resolution processes and aims are still rooted in the assumption that conflict is negative. In other words, by the time a resolution practitioner is involved, the conflict has escalated in ways that accentuate the negative dynamics, so the response is to focus on the issues/problem in an attempt to reduce or resolve the conflict.

This understanding of conflict has profound implications for how it is addressed. Lederach (2003) points out that a transformational approach brings a very different set of lenses through which to view a conflict.

b. The lenses of conflict transformation

In much the same way as a graded pair of glasses is configured, Lederach's three lenses are held together in a single frame. Each lens provides a different view of the current reality, while simultaneously building a picture of the whole. The first lens focuses attention on the immediate situation: the content of the conflict. The second lens looks beyond the content to the context of the conflict and its embedded patterns of relationship. The third lens provides a "conceptual framework" to connect the immediate problems with the underlying relational context.

> Such a framework can provide an overall understanding of the conflict, while creating a platform to address both presenting issues and the changes needed at the level of the deeper relational patterns (Lederach 2003:11).

This conceptual framework allows for an understanding of the presenting issue in relation to observable patterns of the relationships involved and the history from which the issue emerged. It facilitates solutions which pay attention not only to those relationships but to the systems within which those relationships are conducted. Moreover, the transition from issues to solutions pays careful attention to the personal, relational, structural, and cultural characteristics of not only the current episode of conflict, but of what Lederach calls the "epicentre" of the conflict: the relational patterns and history which can generate ongoing cycles of conflict (Lederach 2003:35-36).

The lens metaphor is useful here because it nuances the fact that, far from leaving resolution processes behind, conflict transformation enlarges on them while simultaneously changing their orientation from a problem-solving one to a more holistic and far reaching transformational paradigm. In other words, many of conflict resolution's practices are enlisted into the process of realizing the goals of conflict transformation, and are especially helpful when energies are focussed on the immediate problems. However, the lens metaphor also serves to delineate the range and limitations of conflict resolution approaches: when the presenting problem is "resolved" resolution processes end. On the other hand, a transformational view would see resolution of the presenting problems as only a partial and limited response. The relationships affected by the conflict also need careful attention if "something desired" is to be built (Lederach 2003:33), or, in the language of narrative mediation, if an alternative story is to be conceived.

Early on in my research I found myself in conversation with a health professional whom I had not met before. When she discovered my research topic, our conversation immediately took a serious turn. She became increasingly animated as she described a situation in her previous workplace. A conflict between her and a colleague was referred to workplace mediation. They had several mediation sessions before arriving at a mutually satisfying outcome which allowed them to work together. But the relationship with her colleague never recovered. Loss of trust and collegiality made the workplace increasingly difficult to function in until she finally left about six months after the conflict had been resolved. Her parting words were sobering: "The mediation process fixed the problems but did nothing to address the pain the conflict had inflicted. I

knew the issue was resolved, but I was left feeling cheated and I realized it was only a matter of time before a new issue brought us into conflict again".

When conflict occurs relationships are necessarily and irrevocably altered, people's perceptions of one another are changed, trust breaks down. While resolution approaches may resolve the presenting issue, they are less likely to pay attention to the relational dis-ease created by the conflict. Collaborative mediation incorporates a concern to educate the people involved in the conflict so that next time they face conflict they are better prepared to deal with it constructively. But that is not the same as addressing the relational fall out in ways that could not only minimize the damage, but build a stronger relationship.

Conflict transformation, on the other hand, is not content to resolve the issues, or even to address the psychological and relational damage sustained during the conflict. Conflict transformation incorporates both these responses but moves beyond them to find ways the relationships affected can not only be improved, but be sustained into the future.

Because conflict is embedded in relationships, any process which fails to attend to the relational dynamics can only ever be a temporary measure. The longer term the relationship is, the more energy needs to be invested in ensuring the conflict is transformed into a catalyst for positive growth rather than destructive decline. Christian congregations are comprised of webs of long term relationships and as such would benefit significantly from adopting a transformational rather than a resolution approach to navigating conflicts.

c. Capacity development

The adoption of a transformational rather than a resolution approach also requires the practitioner to develop a distinct set of capacities (Lederach 2003). These differ significantly from the skills required by a conflict resolution practitioner.

One of the challenges facing any practitioner involved with conflict in a communal setting is that of complexity: the complexity of the presenting issues, the relationships and the organizational context. Conflict resolution mediators aim to simplify or at least streamline the issues. Mediators then make broad assessments about the causes of the problem and locate all parties' opinions into those assessments (Bush and Folger 1994). Once again, a transformational practitioner moves well beyond this approach.

Rather than creating a frame through which the issues might be interpreted, conflict transformation sees the presenting issues themselves as windows through which the context of the conflict might be viewed.

> This ability to look at, as well as through, permits us to develop a change-oriented process that is responsive to the immediate content and addresses the greater context within which it was given birth (Lederach 2003:49).

I think this capacity to view the presenting issues as a window engenders both curiosity and imaginativeness. These qualities enhance the other capacities Lederach sees as key for the practitioner. First, "the capacity to pose the energies of conflict as dilemmas" (Lederach 2003:51). In other words the ability to seek not either-or responses to the conflict, but rather, drawing on the imagination, to ask both-and questions which allow for the complexities of

conflict. "[The] capacity to live with apparent contradictions and paradoxes, lies at the heart of conflict transformation" (Lederach 2003:52).

Secondly, and related to it, is the capacity to embrace complexity rather than running from it. Complexity, Lederach (2003) says, often goes hand in hand with a sense of being out of control. In a communal setting, such as a congregation, the potential for complexity cannot be underestimated. The number of inter-relationships, factions, family groupings, theological and generational factors and their interaction with congregational and denominational structures provide fertile soil for ambiguity and conflicts of interest. Befriending complexity means shifting from being overwhelmed by the many things to work through on the one hand or an oversimplification of the issues in order to arrive at a solution on the other, to seeing the range of possibilities for positive change.

Allied to this fresh perspective on complexity, is the need to develop a capacity to integrate multiple time frames (Lederach 2003). The various issues, both short and long term, require varying time frames to address them in. This ability to be comfortable with apparently loose ends in some areas while working on others is especially needed in congregational settings.

For example, a conflict between a parishioner and the person in charge of children's ministries over the content of Sunday school lessons is likely to need much more than a discussion of the reasons that parent disapproved of the materials. Addressing the relational damage caused may be an immediate response. However, the longer term questions around appropriate training for children's ministers, parental input into the decisions around the choice of

materials, congregational decision-making and complaints processes will necessarily require graded time frames if they are to be addressed well. The advantage of a transformational approach is brought into sharp focus in this example. Where a resolution approach might limit itself to the question of who chooses Sunday school materials and arrive at a mutually acceptable agreement, a transformational approach has the potential to address far more and in so doing effect a healthier functioning congregation. New lines of communication and decision making processes will benefit the whole congregation. Furthermore, mutual understanding gained while working towards restoration of the relationship between the children's minister and parent will ensure greater support and cooperation in the long term. Clearly not every disagreement is likely to require or lead to such extensive change. However the point is that the capacities outlined above allow for appropriate responses in a wide range of situations.

Finally, the conflict transformation practitioner, according to Lederach, must "develop a capacity to hear and engage the voices of identity" (2003:55). This commitment to listen for the often unarticulated and unrecognized voices of identity in a conflict is unique to conflict transformation approaches. Resolution advocates would recognize that a person may feel attacked when their values are questioned because their identity is tied up in their values (Mayer 2000).[26] Nevertheless, resolution processes rarely, if ever, seek to draw out or address the parties' sense of identity or ask how that might be fuelling the conflict. For

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[26] A scan of the indices of eight books on conflict management revealed only one reference to identity. This one dealt with identity only as an aspect of the role of religious leaders in ensuring faith communities' identities were based on inclusive rather than exclusive terms. Bock, J. G. (2001). Sharpening Conflict Management: Religious Leadership and the Double-Edged Sword. Westport, Connecticut, Praeger Publishers.

many resolution practitioners, any such attempt would be perceived as crossing the line between resolution and therapy (Mayer 2000:108-115), and they would therefore steer clear of identity issues. Lederach (2003), on the other hand, maintains that most conflicts are rooted in issues of identity: therefore practitioners must be alert to the role of identity in conflict.

> At the deepest level, identity is lodged in the narratives of how people see themselves, who they are, where they have come from, and what they fear they will become or lose (Lederach 2003:55).

Like conflict itself, a person's or group's sense of identity is dynamic and constantly being shaped and reshaped, especially during conflict. In fact one of the primary ways in which identity is shaped is in reaction to other people (Schreiter 1992; Winslade and Monk 2000). If it is true that most conflict finds its roots in issues of identity, and that conflict itself has the potential to shape people's identities, then it is imperative that practitioners are alert to the voices of identity in a given conflict. This is especially true for congregations where it is too easy assume that members share a common understanding of their corporate identity. Once again, in contrast to resolution approaches, conflict transformation offers insights into and processes for navigating dynamics of identity which are especially pertinent in congregational conflict. This awareness of the role identity plays in a conflict leads to the question of what place the practitioner fills in these two approaches to conflict.

d. The role of the practitioner

Most, if not all, resolution approaches today would see interest-based mediation as the primary mode of operation. So, in contrasting resolution and transformation practitioners, it is important to note the differences in how the

practitioner's role plays out during the process. The concept of mediator neutrality in relation to the needs of disputing parties has come under greater scrutiny in recent years. Bush and Folger's (1994) response to their critics (who questioned the leading role of the transformative mediator) opened the door to an unmasking of what could be described as the myth of mediator neutrality.

> The idea of the mediator as neutral facilitator of the process, who 'makes no assessments, judgements, or value interventions' but is 'wholly supportive of all actors, and adopts a no-fault and neutral position' is now hard to hold (Winslade and Monk 2000:35-36).

While mediators in the resolution model are focussed on resolving the issues and value their neutrality, a transformation practitioner is more likely to have some degree of relationship to the conflicted parties. In fact, conflict transformation training processes are themselves relationally and strategically driven.

> A transformative approach suggests that training is less about the transfer of content than it is about the creation of a dynamic process involving key people who together focus on the realities of the conflict in their context. Strategic capacity and relationship building require a reframing of training from content to process and from transfer to transformation (Lederach 1997:109-110).

The implications for embracing a transformative approach in congregational conflicts are significant. This approach allows the practitioner to pay attention to theological, structural and relational aspects of the conflict from an insider perspective. Not only that, but a transformative approach, far from valuing practitioner neutrality, would seek to harness the potential for transformation at a corporate and long term strategic level by training practitioners from within the affected community. In this way, the training itself forms part of the intervention, and the intervention carries within it a training or capacity building function

(Lederach 1997:108). This not only affects the long term sustainability of any changes made, but it also has the potential to significantly reduce the financial costs associated with having to rely on outside specialist intervention.[27] Seen in this light, a transformative approach is potentially empowering not only of the individuals directly affected by the conflict, but of the entire community. [28]

e. The transformational toolbox

As highlighted earlier, transformation approaches enlarge the focus or field of vision when looking at conflict; they also extend the time frame. One of the effects of this enlarging and extending is that it necessarily expands the toolbox of practices the practitioner might employ in navigating the various phases of the transformation process. Whereas resolution approaches rely on narrowly focussed facilitation and mediation skills (which rely on cognitive analysis), transformational approaches enlist a wide range of skills and processes which rely on the practitioner's capacity to be imaginative, intuitive and responsive for their effectiveness (Lederach 2005). These processes vary according to what phase the conflict is in and aim to be responsive to the particular needs and culture of the group affected. Hence, transformational practitioners employ traditional mediation skills alongside more vocational qualities, such as creativity, imaginativeness and curiosity (Lederach 2005), to

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[27] Financial considerations are particularly important for congregations and the denominational structures they are embedded in. Bringing in outside experts who take their expertise with them at the end of their involvement, creates an expensive, ultimately unsustainable, and arguably unhelpful dependence on external intervention.

[28] Empowering is synonymous with capacity building in Lederach's model. For Lederach, empowerment means "to create and sustain within individuals and communities the movement from "I/we cannot effect desired change" to "I/we can". Lederach, J. P. (1997). Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies. Washington D.C., United States Institute of Peace Press. p. 109.

resource and facilitate restorative justice processes, circles, appreciative inquiry, dialogues, brainstorming, interviews, and role plays to name a few (Kraybill and Wright 2006). Far from being constrained by a single mode of operation, the conflict transformation practitioner is always looking for potential vehicles for transformation within and responsive to the context of the conflict itself. These could equally be drawn from newer transformative mediation practices such as narrative mediation as from ancient indigenous practices, such as circles. The decision around which change processes to employ in a given conflict is then a dynamic and imaginative process rather than a given starting point.

The advantages of this expanded toolbox for congregations are, once again, significant. Not least because many of the processes mentioned above are already practised in some form in many churches, and can be enlisted for the purposes of conflict transformation. This points to another advantage of the transformational approach and that is its "emphasis on the intrinsic value of peoples' abilities and knowledge, and, at the same time, a recognition that increased insight, learning, and growth is necessary and possible" (Lederach 1997:108). While resolution approaches would agree with Lederach's statement in principle, mediator-reliant processes necessarily dilute its impact on practice. However, transformation practitioners keep this emphasis sharply in focus as they determine strategies for involvement and, as mentioned earlier, are thus empowering of whole communities. Conflict transformation recognizes the energy generated in a conflict situation and seeks to harness or channel it for transformational ends by, not only empowering those involved in the conflict to

find their own solutions (which collaborative mediation also does), but by actively training them in the process.

We have looked at the benefits of conflict transformation. However, many would contend that it has significant weak points.

f. Transformation or resolution? A response to conflict transformation's critics

Critics of conflict transformation approaches contend that people in conflict look for "limited and focussed intervention" (Mayer 2000:110) and a speedy resolution to the issues. Conflict transformation unnecessarily prolongs and complicates the problem. The more narrowly focussed aims of resolution approaches certainly pander to the parties' desire to sort the problem and move on with life. However, as has already been noted, the drive toward resolution or settlement of the issues too easily overlooks the relational and systemic elements of the conflict and, in so doing, fails to provide not only lasting solutions but tangible alternatives to spiralling into conflict in the future. Furthermore, resolution approaches' assumption that the individual's needs and desires are paramount reflects a very individualistic set of values. These values are not congruent or compatible with a biblical understanding of the congregation as a community of mutually committed people who, as well as being committed to one another, are committed to being transformed into the image of Christ.

It is also true that, because of their commitment to a vision beyond the horizons of the presenting problem, transformation approaches are both more time consuming and less concerned with the individuals' desire for expediency

than they are with the greater goal of personal and social transformation. This long term commitment has drawn the criticism that transformation approaches are more costly than the more delineated and expedient resolution processes. However, this objection needs to be balanced by transformation's commitment to developing a community's own capacity to address conflict through training its members and so reducing the long term reliance on expert intervention. Moreover, transformation's concern to address the structural and cultural aspects of the conflict, while time consuming in the short term, leads to more lasting and self-sustaining and regulating outcomes in the long term.

Another criticism is that transformative approaches border on therapy and can be experienced as manipulative and controlling (Mayer 2000). This criticism arises from the notion of mediator neutrality, which resolution approaches are rooted in. However, as noted earlier, every mediator has an agenda which drives the mediation encounter to some degree. Resolution approaches take mediator neutrality as a given, while transformation approaches acknowledge mediator involvement and harness it positively in the quest for transformation. In other words, far from manipulating the parties concerned, transformative practitioners are not only facilitators of the transformative process but are themselves subject to its' effects.

Finally, perhaps the most salutary criticism is that transformation's embrace of complexity and multiple time-frames too easily leads to "flakiness" or idealism. In other words, that the people involved in the conflict and its resolution can become bogged down in a multiplicity of processes and eventually be frustrated with the perceived lack of tangible outcomes. This is possibly conflict transformation's greatest danger and this criticism is one that

must be kept firmly in mind for those who would be committed to a transformative model. Lederach's (2003) lenses are once again invaluable here. The immediate lens ensures that the tangible grievances and injustices of the conflict are addressed, while the longer range lens is key in ensuring that the way the immediate issues are addressed is congruent with the future that is to be built. Finally, Lederach's "conceptual framework" is the key in countering the very real danger inherent in this criticism. It is the development and clear articulation of this framework and accompanying processes as well as its use as the ongoing reference point which is vital in maintaining the impetus toward transformation of not only the relationships involved, but the structures in which those relationships are embedded.

Conclusion

Lederach's concept of "ending something destructive and building something desired" marks the essential difference between resolution and transformation approaches. Underpinning and driving transformative responses to conflict is a clear vision of what is to be built in place of the destructive conflict. Resolution approaches confine themselves to ending destructive conflict: they focus on the roots of the conflict and disputing parties are encouraged to look inwards and back in their quest for resolution. Conflict transformation, on the other hand, looks well beyond the available range of vision in any given conflict and imagines the disputing parties reconciled and restored into just relationship with one another. In other words, it actively draws disputants outwards and forward and seeks to build a peace which has distinct

qualities. This process is necessarily viewed more as journey than event, more risky than assured, more responsive and imaginative process than prescribed practice. The transformation facilitator is more co-sojourner than intervening expert and as such is potentially just as much transformed as the parties directly involved in the conflict.

Finally, given the relational, sociological, structural and historical dynamics of congregations outlined earlier in this chapter, transformative approaches to conflict are eminently better suited to the needs of Christian churches than prevailing problem-solving or resolution models. The place of narrative in a congregations' self-understanding, the longevity of the relationships, the key role of identity, the profound effects of theology on church structures and history, and the members' enduring commitment to being transformed into Christ-likeness cry out the need for the kind of flexibility, responsiveness, and attention to relationships that conflict transformation offers.

One final question remains. What can a conversation, between the theology for conflict found in Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 and the conflict transformation approach outlined here, offer to the quest for a theologically integrated model for addressing congregational conflict? It is this conversation that I now turn to in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Transforming Initiatives – Conflict Transformation in Dialogue with Matthew 18.

Introduction

The previous chapter ended with the question: What can a conversation, between the theology for conflict, found in Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18, and a conflict transformation approach, offer to the quest for a theologically integrated model for addressing congregational conflict? Here, I will frame this conversation around two areas. First, in line with conflict transformation's concern for developing the capacity to engage with conflict in positive ways (Lederach 2003:48), I will examine the ways in which the theology and spirituality embodied in Matthew 18 offers congregations the potential to enhance their capacity to navigate conflict in ways that are congruent with their identity as followers of Christ. Second, whilst theology and spirituality are important, there is nevertheless the need to appropriate a set of skills which are consistent with these underlying commitments. Therefore this second section will bring the process of Matthew 18 into dialogue with the skills employed in conflict transformation and demonstrate how they complement and sharpen/modify each other.

The goal of this conversation is twofold. First, I want to show how conflict transformation theory and the teaching in Matthew 18 are mutually enriched when they are brought into dialogue with one another. Second, and pivotal to the purpose of this thesis, I want to put forward a model that is firmly rooted in Matthew 18 yet enriched and given contemporary expression by the principles and practice of conflict transformation.

All conversations have a context, a backdrop which shapes the dialogue and necessarily privileges the content. This conversation is no exception. As I stated in the Introduction, the purpose of this thesis is to deepen the conversation between conflict theory and theology, to provide the rationale for a theologically integrated conflict transformation model as the most appropriate for worshipping communities to understand and respond constructively to the problem of interpersonal conflict. In other words, this conversation began with the peculiar needs of congregations in mind. Hence the discussion is conducted between two voices for the sake of a third: between the voice of the Matthean Jesus addressing his followers prior to his passion in Matthew 18, and the voice of conflict transformation with its concern to not only end destructive conflict but build something desirable in its place, for the sake of contemporary worshipping communities and the challenges they face today. This is the specific context.

The backdrop is an understanding of the church as the gathered community of followers of Christ and the visible sign of the kingdom on earth. The members of this community are committed to one another as brothers and sisters in God's family and fellow citizens of his kingdom, and to their ongoing transformation into Christ's likeness. Because Christian congregations view the Bible as their primary source of guidance and authority, the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 18 are necessarily privileged in a discussion on congregational conflict. However, this does not mean that contemporary conflict theory cannot both enhance and be enriched by Jesus' teaching. With these assertions in mind, let the conversation begin!

1. Capacity Building

Childlike humility was Jesus' starting point in teaching his disciples and is a helpful place to begin the conversation at hand. In Matthew 18 Jesus is talking about the ways in which members of his kingdom would sustain one another and build a community which would reflect its values on earth. The childlike humility Jesus describes, as an essential mark of discipleship and belonging to the kingdom of heaven, is intrinsic to their capacity to follow Jesus' teaching on forgiveness and reconciliation. This humility is also the key to the disciples' ability to imagine that in the midst of destructive conflict "things do not have to be this way" (Katongole and Rice 2008), and to bring that imagination to bear on addressing the concerns at hand. The lack of humility that presumes to hold the only answers to a problem and that sees itself as superior to an opponent also has the tendency to stifle the creativity and collaboration required to build and sustain the kingdom community. The humility that Jesus explicitly expects as a sign of kingdom belonging, the kind of humility that listens with openness and perseveres in the search for a resolution (as exemplified in the parable of the stray sheep), is an implicit requirement if the goals of conflict transformation and reconciliation are to be achieved.

a. A vision of the kingdom

Conflict transformation is concerned not only to end destructive conflict, but to build something desirable in its place. This desirable alternative is formulated and articulated by those caught up in the conflict as they engage in the processes of conflict transformation. In contrast, a worshipping community is birthed in and defined by its commitment to the desired alternative already

articulated for it in the life and teachings of Jesus. So when conflict comes,

childlike humility and imagination are enlisted in order to reclaim and embody

the vision of the kingdom of heaven which Jesus demonstrates. This vision is

most clearly articulated in the beatitudes (Matt. 5:1-12).

> The beatitudes are Jesus' attempt to define the ethos of the messianic community as a colony or showcase of God's kingdom. They set forth the values and priorities that the Christian community will incarnate in the world when it is faithful to its vocation. The sayings about purity, love, generosity and mercy are not simply individual virtues but 'representative portraits of the new community's daily life of discipleship' (Marshall 2003:19).

Lederach (2003) presumes a similar imaginative engagement when he

describes the need to see presenting issues in a conflict as windows. Conflict

transformation looks beyond the presenting issues to what lies behind them and

to the relationships in which the conflict has arisen. Once again, Jesus' teaching

sharpens the focus by providing the context within which the relationships are

conducted. In a congregational context, the backdrop to any conflict is God's

commitment to watch over every member, and especially the most vulnerable.

In this way every conflict is an invitation to recall and reclaim the identity of

those involved as loved by God and members of his kingdom (Matt. 18: 10-14).

In addition, Jesus' unequivocal expectation that his followers would be diligent

in their care for one another in ensuring that none be diverted in their

commitment to him casts a particular light on how the presenting issues in a

conflict might be viewed (Matt. 18:6-9).

b. An understanding of the true nature of the presenting issues

The issues are potential stumbling blocks to walking in the way of Jesus. Certainly, whenever conflict erupts, there is ample temptation to sin or to behave in ways that are not consistent with the values Jesus embodies. Furthermore, in viewing both the content and the relational context of a conflict, those involved not only look for the patterns those relationships exhibit over time, but can build a clear picture of what the desired outcome should be. While conflict transformation looks to identify relational and structural aspects contributing to a conflict and aims to transform the situation through change processes (Lederach 2003), Jesus' teaching sharpens the desired end in its perseverance until nothing short of reconciliation has been achieved. In other words, Jesus teaching tangibly shapes and visualizes what conflict transformation practitioners allude to. If, as I demonstrated earlier, conflict transformation and Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 agree that conflict can be viewed as an invitation to personal and communal transformation, they also both point to a fresh perspective on one's adversary.

c. A changed perception of the enemy

Jesus' teaching carries the understanding that one's adversary is to be approached, lovingly confronted with the issues, listened to and advocated for in any efforts to restore the relationship (Matt. 18:15-17). According to Jesus' teaching, an enemy is simply one who stands in need of forgiveness and restoration. Similarly, conflict transformation sees an adversary as a potential collaborator in achieving the transformation of not only the conflict itself but of the relationships and structures in which the conflict is embedded. Both see the

adversary as a potential ally to be gained, rather than an enemy to be vanquished. Jesus' teaching once again goes further: the purpose of regaining one's estranged brother or sister is not only reconciliation in the short term, but their reintegration into the community of the eternal kingdom. Marshall (2003) aptly captures the importance of community to the capacity to persevere in the way of discipleship. Belonging to the colony of the kingdom requires,

> … that each individual member strives to live in conformity to Jesus' demands. But it is impossible to do so without the support and trust of others. It is precisely as isolated individuals that we are most likely to fail as disciples. We will be inspired and empowered to live 'beatitudinally' only in so far as we are surrounded by fellow believers who share our commitment and whose collective direction will sustain us when we fail individually (2003:20).

Likewise, dealing with the things which personally detract from following the way of Jesus is not only about individual transformation, but about eternal salvation (Matt. 18:8-9). It is here that conflict transformation's capacity to integrate multiple time frames (or in the language of narrative mediation, multiple narratives) provides a helpful paradigm for congregations in conflict.

d. Integrating the present and the future

When faced with the immediacy of a conflict, Jesus' followers are called to childlike humility and loving concern for one another, not only to restore the integrity of the community in the present, but to exhibit in the current situation the realities of belonging to God's eternal kingdom. In other words, congregations are to address conflict and sin in ways that integrate the present and the future. Or, to put it another way, worshipping communities need to ensure the narratives they construct in times of conflict are congruent with the meta narrative of God's eternal kingdom and his will that none be lost (Matt. 18:14). Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 keeps this projected future firmly in view

by emphasizing (in graphic, even grotesque, images as seen in Matthew 18:6-9, and in the stark warning of 18:35) the eternal implications of the believers' interactions with each other, especially in times of conflict. In much the same way that conflict transformation is willing to sacrifice short term gains, such as a swift resolution of the issues, in order to safeguard its commitment to the longer term aim of transformed relationships and structures, so worshipping communities need to eschew expedient solutions which undermine their long term commitment to their individual members' eternal wellbeing. Such a commitment will become increasingly possible as congregational members grow in their self understanding and in their empathetic recognition of one another.

e. Nuanced empowerment and recognition

Personal empowerment and empathetic recognition of others are key values and aims of conflict transformation. Once again, the terminology helpfully languages aspects of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18, while also providing a point of difference in how these terms are understood in a congregational setting. In the previous chapter, personal empowerment was described as a strengthening of the self "through realizing and strengthening one's inherent human capacity for dealing with difficulties" (Bush and Folger 1994:81). This notion of strengthening the self is useful in identifying the need for self awareness which lies just beneath the surface in Jesus' teaching (Matt. 18:1-9). However, while Bush and Folger's personal empowerment comes from a fresh awareness of one's own strength and capacity to engage the challenges of life, the self awareness of Matthew 18 is in the opposite direction. Jesus' teaching highlights his followers' true condition: vulnerable and unpractised children on

the one hand, and the apple of God's eye on the other. Marginalised and without rights by society's standards, yet at the very centre of the conduct of the affairs of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:18-20). The humility Jesus calls his disciples to is this paradoxical awareness of their true standing before God and others. Moreover, any sense of empowerment comes from the realization of Jesus' empowering presence rather than an awareness of their own competency (Matt. 18:20). As the parable of the unforgiving servant so graphically demonstrates, it is only when this paradoxical self awareness is experienced that any genuine compassionate recognition of another is possible.

Once again, this concept of recognition languages and adds depth to what is alluded to in Jesus' parable (Matt. 18:23-34) as well as the responsible sensitivity (Matt. 18:6-9) and caring commitment (Matt. 18:10-14) Jesus calls for. As was noted in the first section of this thesis, if the unforgiving servant had had a true understanding of both the enormity of his debt and the corresponding magnitude of the king's compassionate forgiveness (Matt. 18:27), he would not have responded to his fellow servant with the callousness Jesus decries (Matt. 18:28-30). Conflict transformation prioritizes opportunities for the acknowledgement of harm in its efforts to foster a compassionate recognition of the others' situation which might lead to positive and collaborative action. This type of recognition functions as a direct counter to the cognitive dynamics of enmity.

Here, Lederach's work is particularly helpful: "The origin of enmity lies in a self-definition built on a negative projection about another" (Lederach 1999:48). Robert Schreiter concurs when he observes that enmity begins with the negative portrayal of someone as "other" (1992). Lederach (1999) sheds

further light on the relationship between empowerment and recognition when he

identifies the need to develop a positive identity of self and group that is not

based on criticizing or feeling superior to another. His assertion that, "I cannot

create an enemy when I look for and find that of God in another" (Lederach

1999:50), sits compatibly with Jesus' injunction in the parable of the straying

sheep that his disciples were to take care to not despise or disparage a fellow

believer because each one is precious to God.

In fact Jesus' teaching is a good example of the interplay between

personal agency and recognition of the other. Because empowerment comes

from Jesus' presence and from an awareness of their own standing before God

as totally dependent yet fully loved children, there is little room for the

superiority that typically keeps the parties from compassionate recognition of

their adversary. Hence, if congregations are to enhance their capacity to

navigate conflict in ways that are congruent with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18,

they must grasp this theologically nuanced understanding of both personal

empowerment and compassionate recognition of others. Just as conflict

transformation looks for ways to foster both empowerment of self and

recognition of others, so Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 enjoins his followers to

pay attention both to self and others in situations of conflict. This capacity to

hold seemingly competing perspectives at the same time is another important

contribution that a transformational approach brings.

f. An enlarged frame of reference

Lederach (2003) stresses the need to move from an either/or to a

both/and frame of reference in addressing conflict. This is particularly helpful in

situations involving clear wrongdoing in a congregational setting. As noted

earlier, churches have wavered between two poles in addressing sinful

behaviour: a litigiousness that is experienced as harsh and alienating at one

end, and a licentiousness that overlooks wrongdoing in its efforts to show loving

concern for the offender at the other. The underlying concerns of each pole are

perceived as mutually exclusive: a concern to uphold biblical standards of

behaviour, versus a concern to be loving and forgiving toward those who falter

in their commitment to those standards. A dilemma is born and levels of

complexity come into play as the congregation looks to a resolution. The voices

of truth and justice line up against the cries for mercy and peace (Lederach

1999) and the divide deepens as whole communities line up on these opposing

sides and each side allows itself to be defined by the voices they represent. In

the first part of this thesis, I have shown that the process Jesus teaches his

followers in Matthew 18 holds these two sides in balance with the implicit

expectation that each of these voices be heeded in the course of addressing the

issues which gave rise to the conflict.

Similarly, conflict transformation's embrace of paradoxical dilemmas and

the complexity they bring provides a complementary articulation of what is

largely implicit in Jesus' teaching:

> Complexity requires that we develop the capacity to identify the key
> energies in a situation and hold them up together as interdependent
> goals..The formula is this: How can we address "A" and at the same time
> build "B"? The ability to pose situations as dilemmas, the capacity to live
> with apparent contradictions and paradoxes, lies at the heart of conflict
> transformation. The art of dilemma-posing creates a simple way to see
> the bigger picture and move us toward specific action (Lederach
> 2003:52).

The process Jesus describes in Matthew 18, which I earlier concluded is more journey than event, more risky than assured, more responsive and imaginative initiative than prescribed practice, in my view presupposes a capacity to hold this view of complexity and an openness to dilemmas. Jesus' expectation that his followers become like little children if they want to enter his kingdom offers an illuminating perspective here. It is in the nature of a child to press into rather than run away from dilemmas and complexity. When confronted with a paradoxical dilemma a child typically becomes curious and this curiosity engenders creativity in seeking a resolution. Furthermore, unlike adults, whose life experiences can lead to a narrowing of expectations around what outcomes are possible, a child is neither cynical nor restricted as they consider ways to address the dilemma they face. Hence, as is true with conflict transformation processes generally, the effectiveness of the process in Matthew 18 depends on a trust in the process itself (which comes with a guarantee that Jesus will be present to guide and sustain whenever it is engaged with in humble submission to him[Matt. 18:20]). Moreover, Jesus' promise to be present whenever his followers meet to discern the way forward in a conflict is an indicator that he understood the complexities involved and the need for perseverance and support in the search for outcomes that reflect the commitment to reconciliation he requires of them.

g. Summary

To summarize the conversation around what congregations need to enable them to address conflict it is clear that childlike humility is the key to their ability to develop the capacities required. Just what is needed is helpfully conceptualized in the language of conflict transformation, and in turn modified

by the theology for conflict derived from Matthew 18. Both conflict transformation and Jesus' teaching require attention to the content and the context of conflict. Furthermore, a capacity to integrate multiple time frames provides for congregations to respond to conflict in ways that integrate present and future realities and which reflect their commitment to the values of God's kingdom. Allied to this capacity to integrate multiple time frames, is the capacity to pose issues as dilemmas and to be prepared to embrace the resulting complexity. Finally, conflict transformation's self empowerment and recognition are modified by congregational members' understanding of their identity as totally dependent children yet fully loved and central to God's purposes. This self understanding also enables a redefining of the adversary as a sibling to be regained, not an enemy to be defeated.

With a clearer sense of the ways in which congregations can enhance their preparedness to address conflict in ways that reflect the values of the kingdom of heaven, we now turn to the specific skills and processes required.

2. Honing the skills: The practice of congregational conflict transformation.

One of the challenges congregations face when looking for processes to address conflict is that the straightforward process of Matthew 18 can appear inadequate to the task of addressing the very complex situations so common today. For example, while Jesus expects his followers to seek out their offenders, confront them and seek reconciliation, he does not provide specific tools or processes they might employ in doing so. Similarly, while the imperative

to forgive is unequivocal, Jesus does not elucidate on the nature or psychological and cognitive dynamics of the forgiveness process itself. The cry, "I know I need to forgive, but just how do I do that?" is all too common in churches today. Conversely, congregations are easily overwhelmed by the plethora of tools and processes available to them from different fields of conflict resolution. Having already established the compatibility of a conflict transformation approach with Jesus' teaching, this part of our conversation will use the process Jesus taught as the starting point and ask how transformative processes might enhance its application within worshipping communities. However, one of the major contributions of conflict transformation to congregations is the tools it brings to the analysis of conflict and to the relationships affected by it as a first step in addressing the situation. Hence our discussion begins prior to the first step of the process Jesus taught.

a. Conflict Analysis

In the chapter on a theology for conflict we noted that, prior to going to meet the offender face to face, there is a need for self-reflection and clarity around the issues at stake. We affirmed that the lead up to such an encounter requires judgement in both directions: self-reflection as well as the need to grapple with just what constitutes sin and/or on what basis the person is to be challenged. When it comes to broader congregational conflicts, one might also ask just who should be approached in the first instance? What is the nature of the particular conflict? Who is involved? What part does the congregation's structure and culture play in the conflict? It is here that a transformational approach, with its deeper understanding of the dynamics of conflict and the processes for uncovering and articulating these dynamics, proves invaluable.

The practice of conflict mapping and analysis developed within the field of conflict transformation allows congregations not only to understand the presenting issues more clearly, but to frame solutions that pay attention to the relationships and structures or systems they are embedded in.[29]

These tools provide a framework within which church structures might be evaluated without compromising their ecclesiological commitments, while allowing for robust appraisals of how well the structures are serving those theological and ecclesiological priorities. In addition, more recent awareness of the role an organization's culture plays in conflict provides a place where congregations might explicitly address Jesus' expectations of the kind of culture a community of his followers will exhibit. For example, the Organizational Tree conceptualized by Joanne Dietzel (Brubaker and Zimmerman 2009:8), allows a congregation to pay attention to not only its structure and culture but to the health of its leadership as well as the wider environment the congregation functions within. This tool is particularly helpful because it identifies the many factors which both affect and are affected by a congregation especially in times of conflict. It allows for the conflict to be viewed in its fullest context and clarifies how to prioritize any responses to it. Similarly, conflict transformation's penchant for nested models for understanding conflict allows for a deeper and broader identification of the factors in any given conflict. For example, a typical congregation is nested within its denominational structures nationally and internationally, within its local community, within its city and country, and finally

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[29] For a diagrammatic representation of conflict transformation, see Lederach, J. P. (2003). <u>The Little Book of Conflict Transformation: Clear articulation of the guiding principles by a pioneer in the field.</u> Intercourse, Pennsylvania, Good Books. p. 35.

within the wider world. Changing values and perceptions in each of these spheres can affect the dynamics in a given conflict.

Furthermore, conflict transformation offers useful insights into the power dynamics of conflict situations. Power is understood not only in terms of positional or legitimated status (as can be the case in conflicts between church leaders and congregational members), but in terms of "controlling currencies that other people need and value, and can be used for, against or with others" (Lederach 2008:54). These currencies include expertise, resource control, interpersonal networks, intimacy, authority and personal presence (Lederach 2008). Alertness to these power dynamics is vital if congregations are to navigate their conflicts with the humility and care Jesus expects of his followers.

Finally, even in situations of interpersonal conflict, the tools developed within conflict transformation are useful as a framework within which to identify the factors at play and to clarify just what needs to be brought to a face to face meeting. The need for self-awareness is implied in Matthew 18:6-9 where Jesus stresses the importance of understanding not just the effect of one's behaviour on others, but of personally discerning those things which interfere with following the way of Jesus. However, Jesus does not provide specific tools for the development of such self-awareness and sensitivity to others. Here the insights of conflict transformation prove invaluable.

> Effective conflict management begins with self-management and self management begins with self awareness..The value of such understanding is magnified in conflict.. We can combine self-awareness, knowledge of the variety of responses to conflict that are available, and continual skill-building to work at responding more constructively to the conflicts - the "differences heated up" – that are part of our lives (Brubaker and Stutzman 2008:34-35).

Helpful tools include personal conflict style inventories (Kraybill 2008:36-38) and approaches to conflict (Kraybill 2008:39), as well as the more generic indicators such as the Myers-Briggs Types,[30] which help parties understand what predispositions they bring to conflict. In addition, the simpler tools for conflict analysis, such as the conflict tree, can be used to gain deeper insight into even apparently straightforward conflicts between two or three people. The conflict tree is widely used to differentiate between the symptoms (foliage) and the causes (roots) of a conflict in order to identify what the core issue/s might be. Once again, this tool is helpful for clarifying the dynamics which contribute to interpersonal and multi-party conflicts, including those involving overt sin or wrongdoing.

In light of the above, it is clear that, as was noted in the first chapter of this thesis, the potential for personal transformation begins long before an encounter takes place. But what of the encounter itself? Just what does Jesus teaching require? In spite of its deceptive simplicity, we have already seen that the three step process Jesus taught requires respectful truth telling, risky vulnerability, and corporate discernment. However, Jesus does not elaborate on the skills each step might draw on. It is here that the processes and tools of conflict transformation helpfully flesh out Jesus' instructions.

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[30] Myers-Briggs personality type indicators help identify a person's preferences using four continua: extroversion-introversion, sensing-intuition, thinking-feeling, and judging-perceiving. These can be helpful in understanding responses to conflict as expressions of the values characteristic of different personality types. Brubaker, D. and J. Stutzman (2008). Know Thyself. Conflict Transformation and Restorative Justice Manual. M. E. Armster and L. S. Amstutz. Akron, Pennsylvania, Mennonite Central Committee Office on Justice and Peacebuilding: 34-35.

b. Listening and Speaking

The first step in Jesus' teaching is to go one on one to try to address the problem. Most if not all congregational conflicts begin with or are first manifested in a disagreement between two individuals. As noted earlier, the conflict may be over anything from worship styles to cases of overt wrongdoing. Regardless of what precipitated the conflict, Jesus' instruction requires deep listening, clear and truthful communication, an openness to forgive, and a commitment to reconciliation from the outset. Going directly to the person concerned safeguards against the dangers of triangulation, the dynamic at play when a third party is coopted into taking on the problem as their own. Triangulation opens the way for destructive miscommunication and manipulation. Conflict transformation approaches focus on the relational skills required, and take into account the psychological needs which are common in conflict situations. While these skills are vital to all three steps in the Matthew 18 process, their employment from the beginning often results in an early resolution thus obviating the need to proceed to the next step.

First, the skill of listening for understanding. Porter (2010) asserts that, "conflict transformation is built on this particular skill" (2010:40). Listening fills one of the speaker's deepest needs: that of being heard and understood. As such it engenders trust and respect in both parties. The ability to genuinely listen and wait, as opposed to pretending to listen while "rehearsing [a] rebuttal" (Kahane 2007:42), creates a space where the parties can tell their own story or narrative of the conflict. And as Schreiter (2006) asserts, the retelling of stories is not so much about changing the story as it is about gaining new perspective. Hence, when that listening includes clarifying questions, the speakers obtain a

deeper understanding of themselves and the situation at hand. Conversely, listening provides an opportunity for the listener to learn and be changed, not only through the speakers' unique perspective, but because of the possibility of hearing God through the words of the other (Lederach 1999; Porter 2010). Transformational insights around the importance of body language, the creation of safe spaces, good question technique, and the skills of paraphrasing and summarizing are all valuable contributions to the listening that is implicit in Jesus' teaching.

Second, the skill of speaking the truth in love. Here too, the very specific tools of conflict transformation are useful. The disciplined use of "I" statements limits the possibility of speaking the "truth" in a volley of accusatory and emotionally destructive statements. Allied to this is a commitment to speak only for oneself, without representing others. In addition, being specific counters the dangers of making the generalizations which so easily lead to dehumanizing perceptions of others (Schreiter 1992). Which leads us to a third commitment of conflict transformation: that of attending to the language and narratives employed during conflicted encounters.

Narrative mediation's assertion that language is not only descriptive but has the power to create future realities is especially pertinent to the outworking of the Matthew 18 process. I earlier noted that the backdrop to Jesus' teaching is the kingdom of heaven. This kingdom is outworked through its members' commitment to forgiveness and reconciliation, justice and peace (Matt. 23:23 cf Rom. 14:17 and II Cor. 5:16-20). Hence, the language believers in conflict use needs to reflect the kingdom reality they are committed to building. To reiterate Winslade and Monk's assertion, congregational members must "take care to

talk with an eye on the kind of world [they] are creating because [they] are already in the process of creating it" (2000:40-41).

This close attention to language is particularly crucial in the second step of the process in Matthew 18: when a third party is invited into the conflict in order to gain clarity and perspective, with the goal of reconciliation clearly in view. The transformative practitioner's attention both to language and to the parties' ongoing transformation shifts the overall focus from merely resolving the issues to the deeper commitments of God's kingdom noted above. It is not a case of overlooking the issues or sins which resulted in the conflict, but rather of keeping them in their proper place so that the relational priorities can also be given due attention. It is here that another essential skill of conflict transformation proves especially helpful in a congregational context: the facilitation of dialogue.

c. Dialogue Facilitation

While many believers in conflict understand the need to talk with their adversary, and are persuaded of the value of enlisting the help of a third party to do so, few have the skills required to do so. Hence, when a well meaning third party enters a conflict situation with a concern to facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation, such an encounter can too often leave the parties "stuck". Each party may manage to articulate their side of the story, and even avoid using accusatory rhetoric, but few church members or leaders have the skills to move the parties beyond that point. The issue might be clarified, but a way forward is not found, and the relational impact is not addressed. Too often, it seems, the parties "agree to disagree" and walk away dissatisfied. Conflict transformation's

priority in this area of dialogue has much to offer here, and has the potential to

help believers in conflict get "unstuck" and so stay the distance in their

commitment to the forgiveness and reconciliation Jesus looks for.

Dialogue is much more than a verbal exchange. Lisa Schirch and David

Campt (2007) differentiate between dialogue and other modes of

communication (such as conversation, discussion, debate, and education) to

arrive at their own definition:

> Dialogue is a communication process that aims to build relationships
> between people as they share experiences, ideas, and information about
> a common concern. It also aims to help groups take in more information
> and perspectives than they previously had as they attempt to forge a new
> and broader understanding of a situation (Schirch and Campt 2007:6).

This understanding of dialogue sits very compatibly with the priorities for a

mediated encounter in Matthew 18, where the purpose of calling two or three

witnesses is one of discernment and clarification, with forgiveness,

reconciliation, and restoration of fellowship clearly in view.

In engaging the parties' intellects, emotions, and spirits (Schirch and

Campt 2007), a well facilitated dialogue engenders transformative possibilities

in each of these dimensions and offers the potential for those involved to grow

in the theologically nuanced empowerment and compassionate recognition of

others noted earlier. Moreover, the specific skills that conflict transformation

brings to the dialogue process are enduring in the sense that those involved

themselves learn healthier ways of communication which they can draw on in

the future.

Schirch and Campt (2007) observe that this type of dialogue has positive

effects beyond the present protagonists. These include reduced divisions as

historical differences are addressed, a deeper sense of community as disparate people are drawn together, improved communication patterns as these are modelled and encouraged during the course of a dialogue, and greater collaboration in not only identifying important issues, but in planning collective action (Schirch and Campt 2007:17-22). In this way, dialogue can be said to function as a "transforming initiative" (Stassen and Gushee 2003) in that its consistent practice has the potential to break the cycles of destructive patterns of interaction within worshipping communities.

Finally, dialogue's commitment to action counteracts the tendency noted earlier to have conversations that lead to a stalemate and paralysis. This commitment to action not only moves the protagonists beyond a stalemate, but also allows them to actively embrace the social radicalism of Jesus' teaching. In other words, dialogue not only breaks destructive patterns of behaviour, but promotes an active embodiment of the behaviours Jesus looks for in Matthew 18: childlike humility, and care and respect for the weaker members. It is this expectation of action which sometimes needs to include the need to move on to the third stage of the process Jesus taught.

d. A Group Process: The Circle

Once again, while Jesus teaches his followers to enlist the help of a wider group of believers in their efforts to address the situation, he gives no tools for how such a gathering might be constituted or conducted. Given the size and organization of most congregations today, some clarity around the skills and processes required for this discernment process would be helpful. Furthermore, if the binding and loosing process of Matthew 18:18 is to be

genuinely communal, careful thought must go into designing the way the gathering is to be convened and conducted. Here conflict transformation's range of processes for group meetings proves especially helpful. These processes presuppose a commitment to the basic principles of listening, speaking and dialogue outlined above. Of the many processes available, I want to focus on one which I think most closely embodies both the spirit and the practice of Jesus' teaching: the Circle Process.

The Circle is one of the most commonly used and flexible group processes in conflict transformation. Participants gather in a circle and the person with the talking piece has a chance to speak without interruptions. The talking piece is passed around sequentially with participants having the option of being silent on their turn. All voices are understood to be equally important. The focus is on speaking with respect and listening to understand, and on discernment as opposed to debate. In this way everyone is encouraged to participate, and differing points of view can be heard.

The values underpinning Circle processes resonate deeply with the values of Matthew 18.

> Circles assume a universal human wish to be connected to others in a good way ... Therefore values that nurture and promote good connections to others are the foundation of the Circle (Pranis 2005:24).

Foundational to Circles are the values of humility, respect, honesty, inclusivity, empathy, trust, compassion, forgiveness and love (Pranis 2005). These are the same values Jesus expects his followers to embody in Matthew 18. Furthermore, the underlying assumptions of the interconnectedness of people, with each other and creation, with the corollary understanding that "Harm to one is harm to all. Good for one is good for all" (Pranis 2005:26), make Circles

especially compatible with Jesus' expectation that his followers would exercise

responsible sensitivity and caring commitment for one another. In addition,

Circle processes uphold the inherent dignity and worth of all, and provide for

even the least among them (cf Matt. 18:10-14) to be heard and valued.

Significantly, the basic elements of Circles provide a framework in which

worshipping communities can be true to the theological priorities for conflict

outlined earlier. These elements are: ceremony or ritual, guidelines, a talking

piece, Circle keeping, and consensus decision-making (Pranis 2005).

i. Ceremonies and Rituals

Opening and closing ceremonies are essential in establishing a space

that is "other" than the space of ordinary life with its tensions and busyness. The

opening ceremony is a time to focus attention, clear negative energies, remind

participants of core values, engender a sense of hope, and value each person's

presence. In a congregational setting where thoughtfully chosen people have

been enlisted for the purposes of binding and loosing, and searching for ways to

restore the stray or bring reconciliation to the estranged, the opening ceremony

can be a time to reiterate Jesus' priorities in Matthew 18, and to welcome his

presence. To create a sacred space where God can work.

> The opening ritual involves the recognition that we are not alone, God is
> with us. Here we open ourselves to God, God's guidance and the
> creativity of the Spirit (Porter 2010:94).

The closing ceremony can be a time to affirm any progress made,

reaffirm the relational commitment of those present as followers of Jesus, and

remind participants of the future hope-filled horizon of the kingdom they are

called to build, in preparation for their re-engagement with life outside of the

Circle. In this way, these Circle ceremonies act like a bridge between life in the world and the life of the congregation. They connect congregational members in tangible ways by affirming not only the relationships which support their lives in the world, but the behaviours and values they will prioritize in their re-engagement with it. Finally, these ceremonies provide an opportunity for worshipping communities to engage their own rituals in the process. Rituals of individual and corporate confession can clear the air before beginning, or be the outcome at the close. Likewise a song, a prayer or a reading might be offered in either the opening ceremony and/or in closing. The Eucharist, while potentially a good example of a healing and restoring Circle in its own right (Porter 2010), can also be celebrated as a closing ritual which reaffirms identity and kingdom perspective.

ii.   Circle Guidelines: A relational covenant

A relational covenant, or guidelines for how participants will behave, is developed and agreed to by them at the start. Typically these guidelines are framed in ways that are congruent with the particular needs of the Circle, but always include a commitment to respectful listening and speaking and some agreed level of confidentiality (Pranis 2005). These practices are there in Matthew 18:15-20 where speaking and listening with humility and concern are an integral part of the process of restoring an erring brother or sister, or reconciling an estranged relationship. The implicit concern to protect the *mana* of the person being confronted in Matthew 18:15 is likewise upheld in the guidelines for confidentiality. Moreover, the use of a talking piece, which "slows the pace of conversation and encourages thoughtful and reflective interactions among participants" (Pranis 2005:35), has the potential to create a space for

listening to and being mindful of the guiding presence of Jesus, especially when the talking piece has some significance to the group (for example, a palm held cross or a candle). This mindfulness is important for all participants, but especially so for the "keeper" (Pranis 2005) or "steward" (Porter 2010).

iii.   The Circle Steward

The role of the Circle facilitator is to "make easy" (Kraybill and Wright 2006:7) the accomplishment of the goals of the meeting, including "helping participants hear each other clearly, balancing multiple voices, finding a common pathway through diverse ideas, and dealing with strong emotions" (Kraybill and Wright 2006:7). In short, a facilitator is there to serve the needs of the group and keep the commitment to "build something desired" firmly in view. This desired end acts like a trig point on a mountain: it is the primary reference point for making decisions about process as well as resolutions while simultaneously attending to the way the process is engaged in during the meeting itself.

> The keeper in a Circle is not responsible for finding solutions or for controlling the group. The keeper's role is to initiate a space that is respectful and safe, and to engage participants in sharing responsibility for the space and for their shared work (Pranis 2005:36).

Porter's (2010) notion of stewardship in regards to the role of the keeper of the Circle fits the teachings of Matthew 18 particularly well, because it nuances the fact that even this facilitative role in a congregational setting is exercised in submission to the spirit of Jesus. Moreover, this role attends to both individual and corporate concerns in ways that echo Jesus' expectations that his followers will exhibit individual accountability and communal responsibility in the way they deal with sin and conflict in their midst.

Finally, the role of the steward is not a neutral one. In a congregational setting, this functions as a helpful corrective to those who would place themselves above others in ways that are not congruent with the humility characterised by those who belong to God's kingdom. The steward facilitates the Circle, or in a congregational setting, the discernment process, without losing sight of their true identity as a child of God in relationship with his or her brothers and sisters; or of the primary reference point which is the spirit of Jesus himself and the values of his kingdom (Matt.18:17-20). Hence, a Circle steward fully participates in and holds him or herself accountable to the Circle process along with the other participants. Likewise, when a decision is finally made, the steward is merely part of the wider Circle consensus, rather than an enforcer of a particular outcome. This allows for a genuine openness to the guidance and creativity of the spirit of Jesus as they "agree" in community (cf. Matt. 18:18-19).

iv.   Consensus Decision-making

The Circle's commitment to consensual decision-making echoes the notion of communal agreement in Matthew 18:19, and embodies the values in Jesus' teaching. Consensus is not the same as unanimity. Rather, consensus values the individuals' needs and interests, while looking for a commitment from participants to meet the needs of others in addition to their own. In line with the capacity to hold paradoxical dilemmas, and self-empowerment and recognition of others, a consensual approach seeks both/and rather than either/or resolutions. Hence this process requires an "attitude of exploration rather than of conquering or persuading" (Pranis 2005:38). This sits well with Jesus' expectation of childlike humility. In addition, Circle practitioners assert that,

while consensus is not always reached, given time and the opportunity for participants to experience that their concerns have not only been listened to but taken into consideration, most people will agree to the consensual decision even if the decision does not go their way (Pranis 2005).

It is important to note that consensus is not about some people getting their own way, while others passively and reluctantly 'go along' with the decision. This step in the Matthew 18 process implies all the deep listening and truthful speaking mentioned earlier, as well as a commitment to find a resolution which is consistent with the values of the kingdom of heaven. Unlike negotiation, which trades individuals' preferences to arrive at a compromise, consensus in a congregational setting means being committed to persevering until the participants are satisfied their decision has been led by the spirit of Jesus and reflects his values. This process of communal discernment and consensus-building carries in it the potential to "enlarge and clarify" (Kreider, Kreider et al. 2005:90) the congregation's vision of the kingdom which Jesus talks about in Matthew 18, thus enhancing their capacity to make decisions which are congruent with that kingdom in the future. In this way, the agreement or consensus-building process functions as a transforming initiative.

Finally, a Circle process requires participants to "pay attention to the interests of those who are normally powerless" (Pranis 2005:38) and thus resonates with Jesus' expectation that his followers would look out for the needs of the least among them (Matt. 18:6-14). This is one reason why, as I observed in the previous chapter on conflict theories, consensus is much more time consuming than the more usual hierarchical or voting approach most congregations favour (Leas 2001). Nevertheless, the winners/losers dynamics

of a hierarchical or voting approach are, arguably, out of step with Jesus' call for humility and concern for others, especially those who are weakest. Moreover, while consensus decision-making is more time consuming, higher levels of commitment from all parties makes for speedier and higher compliance in the implementation of the decisions made.

e. Circles as a place for restorative discipline and forgiveness

I have shown how each of the essential components of the Circle process make it especially appropriate in congregational conflicts which progress to the third stage of the process in Matthew 18. Circles are well suited to congregational conflicts because they allow for the theological priorities of Matthew 18 to be honoured while incorporating the rituals of different worshipping communities. But what happens when the corporate discernment is a "binding" or prohibiting one such that a congregational member must be disciplined in some way? Or when an issue has been resolved through consensus decision-making but the relationships affected still need healing? In the former, conflict transformation's commitment to restorative justice offers helpful insights and processes, while its understanding of the dynamics of forgiveness contribute to the need for forgiveness and healing so real in the latter.

i. Restorative Discipline

One of the contributions of conflict transformation to the field of conflict resolution is its concern to address the harm done. Unlike mediation, which brings the parties together on a level playing field, restorative justice provides for situations of clear wrongdoing involving victims and offenders. Crime is

understood as a "violation of people and of interpersonal relationships" (Zehr 2002:19) and which creates the obligation to put things right. So the restorative process attends to the needs of the victim for truth-telling, empowerment, and vindication, as well as the needs of the offender for accountability to address the harm and foster responsibility, and for the things which led to their offending, with re-integration into the community clearly in view. In addition, the community itself can be victimized by what has occurred, while at the same time have failed to foster the conditions necessary for healthy communal relationships to flourish (Zehr 2002). Restorative justice attends to these three entities (victim, offender, and community) in its efforts to address the wrongs done and recover the integrity of the community. Here also, the Circle is one of the processes commonly used to achieve these aims (Zehr 2002; Porter 2010).

In situations where the congregational consensus is that an erring member needs to be disciplined in some way, the principles of restorative justice are in keeping with the need for truth-telling, acknowledgement of wrongdoing, repentance, and restoration in Matthew 18. Moreover, restorative justice's concern to balance respect for both interconnectedness and particularity (Zehr 2002) resonate with the concern for both individuals and community seen in Matthew 18. Hence, in a restorative approach, a Circle provides the opportunity for those affected to be heard, and for the erring member not only to begin to put things right, but to hear what will be required of them if they are to be re-included into the community. This allows a congregation to focus on the basis for inclusion rather than exclusion noted in the theology chapter, and allows the congregation to take responsibility for

fostering the kind of community which will facilitate healthy re-inclusion and limit the possibility of the erring member straying again.

The restorative principles outlined above clearly serve the needs of a congregational disciplinary process. Restorative justice aims to put things right and sometimes this leads to forgiveness being offered and received, and to reconciliation between the parties (Zehr 2002). Nevertheless, as Howard Zehr (2002) points out, "forgiveness or reconciliation is not a primary principle or focus of restorative justice" (Zehr 2002:8), so a further step is needed for congregations who want to be faithful to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18, where the primary goal is forgiveness and reconciliation.

ii.   Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Much has been written about the dynamics of forgiveness, but most scholars agree on certain key elements. Christopher Marshall (2001) highlights five of these. First, *forgiveness is a choice or response of the victim.* Only the victim/s can release the offender from the relational impact of what they have done. As such it cannot be coerced or rushed (Porter 2010). Second, *forgiveness is an undeserved and generous gift freely offered to the offender,* "a gift of release from the burden of guilt and its destructive consequences in the offender's own life" (Marshall 2001:265). This gift can only be received if the recipient knows it is being offered, so some kind of encounter is usually necessary. Third, *forgiveness is primarily a gift to oneself*, it is "the gift of releasing ourselves from the burden of anger, bitterness, and the thrall of the offence"(Porter 2010:54). Fourth, *forgiveness does not retaliate:*

> To forgive is to transcend this instinct to hit back, to surrender one's right to exact payment in kind from the offender. It is a preparedness to absorb the pain of victimization without seeking to hurt in return as a way of getting even. This means that to forgive is a creative act of love. It is creative in that it acts in a way that is not dictated by the sinful action of another. Forgiveness is a response to pain that does not merely *re-act*, but *acts anew* (Marshall 2001:268).

Finally, *"forgiveness is fulfilled in reconciliation"* (Marshall 2001:268). Indeed one of the primary motivators of forgiveness is the desire for good relationships with others; forgiveness is the means for "regaining" the estranged brother or sister (Matt. 18:15). However, as both Marshall (2001) and Porter (2010) stress, reconciliation is not the same as forgiveness nor is it an inevitable outcome of it. Forgiveness is an individual decision but reconciliation requires mutual agreement. Or, as Porter puts it, "Forgiveness is about healing one's self. Reconciliation involves healing relationships" (Porter 2010:54). Moreover, reconciliation is not about restoring the pre-conflict relationship (not least because in some cases it is the conflict itself which has brought two previously unconnected individuals into a destructive relationship), but about renewing or renegotiating what the relationship will be characterized by in the future. "Reconciliation is not about going back. It is about addressing the past adequately so that we can go forward" (Schreiter 2006:18).

Here Schreiter (2006) presupposes the need for truth telling in the forgiveness and reconciliation process. Having fully engaged the pain of what's happened, when forgiveness has not only been offered, but received, the parties are only then ready to envision a different future together. Furthermore, as Marshall (2001) points out, forgiveness and reconciliation do not preclude formal justice.

That forgiveness is not a substitute for formal justice is of particular importance to congregations dealing with wrongdoing in their midst. The way the church (across several denominations) has dealt with cases of sexual abuse over the past few decades stands as a stark example of the pitfalls of misunderstanding both the nature and scope of forgiveness. The tendency to shift wrongdoers away as a response to such offences fails to address not only the need for formal justice, but for forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. As John Howard Yoder notes, "the therapy for guilt is forgiveness; the source of self-esteem is another person who takes seriously my restoration to community" (2001:8). Significantly, in the same way that healthy processes facilitate healthier congregations in the future, misguided responses like those above, facilitate ongoing cycles of sin and conflict as neither the wrongdoer nor their victims find the healing they need. Hasty or expedient responses carry this same risk of compounding the conflict: time matters.

The processes of conflict transformation, with their understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation, effectively telescope and slow down what at first glance seems like a peremptory way to address sin and conflict in Matthew 18. This telescoping allows for the process to be staged in ways that attend to the complexities of interpersonal and congregational conflicts. The Circle process outlined above is itself deceptively simple. Yet it requires both careful preparation and thoughtful follow-up. Pranis (2005) outlines the four stages of most Circle processes. First, determining the suitability of such a process for the situation at hand (the most basic prerequisite is the key parties' willingness to participate). Second, deciding who needs to participate and familiarizing them with the process. Third, convening the Circle itself (as outlined above), and

fourth, following up on the agreements made, adjusting those as needed, and celebrating the successes attained (Pranis 2005:44-45). Like the process in Matthew 18, each stage in the Circle process is vital to the effectiveness of the whole.

f. Spiritual practices

This telescoping also allows for communal practices which encourage the humility and gratitude that are prerequisites for forgiveness and reconciliation to occur. Johann Arnold (2006) makes explicit what is implicit in the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:

> … once we recognize our own need for forgiveness, we will be able to forgive. This recognition does not come to most of us easily, because it demands humility. But isn't humility the essence of forgiveness? (Arnold 2006:15).

If humility is indeed the essence of forgiveness, then the practice of individual and communal confession discussed earlier plays a key role for congregations in conflict because it fosters this humble recognition of the need for forgiveness. Similarly, the ancient practice of lament is a key to forgiveness and reconciliation within congregations.

Emmanuel Katongele and Chris Rice (2008) suggest there are three things Christians must overcome if they are to lament in ways that lead to genuine reconciliation. First, they need to unlearn the need for speed. Katongele and Rice (2008) echo the need for time to attend to the wounds of conflict and especially to the needs of the vulnerable I noted earlier,

> The more we learn to lament, the more we see the need for time to grow, forgive and learn how to love..Lament slows reconciliation down because it sees the challenge of transformation not from the top but from the margins – indeed from the bottom (Katongole and Rice 2008:81).

Secondly, and in strong agreement with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:15, is the need to overcome distance. The distance and silence that separates conflicted parties needs to be overcome if a community is to understand the depth of suffering caused and find genuine healing. Finally, in line with the need for communities to address aspects of their culture which may have contributed to the conflict, Christians need to overcome the illusion of their own innocence in regards to the causes of conflict and suffering. "Learning lament involves not only seeing the church as broken but also seeing our own complicity, how 'I' am also part of the problem" (Katongole and Rice 2008:86).

While Katongele and Rice (2008) are addressing the need for the church to engage with a broken world, I believe the principles of lament and reconciliation they articulate lie at the heart of how we have understood the process Jesus teaches his followers in Matthew 18. The slowing down or telescoping that occurs when full attention is given to each step in the Matthew 18 process is reflected in the need to "unlearn the habits of speed" (Katongole and Rice 2008:83). Jesus' expectation that his followers would seek a face to face encounter finds its echo in the need to overcome distance. And Jesus' call for humility as a true sense of one's own standing before God and others is a corollary of overcoming the illusion of innocence. Moreover, this relationship between lament and reconciliation would suggest that reconciliation begins with lamenting the divisions experienced in the midst of conflict enough to be committed to working them through.

Finally, the unlearning of speed, distance and innocence open up a space where gratitude for mercy received and celebration for the smallest of

milestones can take root and flourish. And, as we saw in the parable of the unforgiving servant, these too are prerequisites for forgiveness and reconciliation to occur. Moreover, the gratitude that comes from genuinely receiving forgiveness in turn fosters the empathetic recognition of others which allows for reconciliation and ongoing conflict transformation.

> Far from leaving us weak and vulnerable, forgiveness is empowering, both to the person who grants it and the one who receives it. In bringing closure to the most difficult situations, it allows us to lay aside the riddles of retribution and human fairness, and to experience true peace of heart. Finally, it sets in motion a positive chain reaction that passes on the fruits of our forgiveness to others (Arnold 2006:39).

Arnold's (2006) exploration of the dynamics of forgiveness and reconciliation echoes the Matthew 18 notion of forgiveness as a transforming initiative. In other words, forgiveness has the power to break the cycles of conflict people get stuck in and is a prerequisite for reconciliation. Seen in this light, Jesus' insistence in Matthew 18 that a willingness to forgive and go on forgiving is what his followers must be characterized by makes sense. This commitment to forgiveness and reconciliation is the primary way that congregations will sustain one another and build communities that weather the inevitable storms of conflict in ways that reflect the priorities of the kingdom.

Conclusion

In looking back over the conversation between conflict transformation and Jesus' teachings in Matthew 18 we must ask, what stands out in the dialogue? And, just how does this benefit the subject of the conversation, the contemporary church?

First, what stands out? The essential role of humility in enhancing the capacity to address conflict graciously and creatively which is explicit in Jesus' teaching emerges as an unspoken presupposition of conflict transformation. Conflict transformation seeks to develop the capacity to see presenting issues in a conflict as windows so that the content and the context of the conflict can be differentiated. Similarly, Jesus' teaching pays attention to both the content (stumbling blocks and sin) and the context (the kingdom of heaven and God's will that none be lost from it) of conflicts within the community of his followers.

A congregation's awareness of this eternal context enables them to navigate the conflict in ways that integrate both present and future realities, and that are in step with the values of the kingdom of heaven. In the language of conflict transformation, this is the capacity to integrate multiple time frames. Similarly, both conflict transformation and Jesus' teaching require the capacity to hold the paradoxical dilemmas conflict throws up and to embrace the complexity these dilemmas bring.

Finally, the true identity of those caught up in the conflict is clearly portrayed in Jesus' teaching, and involves the capacity to view the adversary not as an enemy to be vanquished but as a family member to be regained. This ability to grasp the true identity of those caught up in the conflict is a vital component of the parties' capacity for empowerment and compassionate recognition. Matthew 18 highlights the notion that, for a member of God's kingdom, any sense of empowerment comes from a humble awareness of total dependence on God on the one hand, and their vital role in God's purposes on the other. This understanding of their true standing before God and others has the potential to keep the members of worshipping communities from the

defensive superiority that precludes compassionate recognition of the fellow believers they are in conflict with.

Second, the benefits to contemporary congregations are nowhere more evident than when the conversation focussed on the process simply outlined in Matthew 18, and applied in greater depth through the specific skills and processes developed in the field of conflict transformation.

In this discussion of the skills required for addressing congregational conflict, there is a clear interplay between the notion of transforming initiative implicit in Matthew 18 and the explicitly transformative priorities of conflict transformation. Conflict transformation presumes that conflict itself functions as an invitation to personal and structural change. On the other hand, Christian congregations are gatherings of Jesus-followers committed to building communities that genuinely reflect the coming kingdom of justice and peace, through ongoing personal and communal transformation. In Matthew 18 Jesus teaches what these communities need to be characterized by: humility, caring concern, loving accountability, restorative discipline, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The process in Matthew 18:15-20, while deceptively simple, has the potential to break the cycles of conflict congregations get stuck in, especially when each step is slowed down to incorporate the tools of conflict transformation.

The skills of deep listening, respectful truth telling, and dialogue facilitation emerge as the building blocks of a transformative response to conflict and are integral to the way the Matthew 18 process is outworked, especially in the initial two stages. The third stage of this process enlists the help of the wider

worshipping community in addressing the conflict (Matt. 18:17). Here, the Circle process facilitates all the discernment required not only for binding and loosing, but for restorative discipline and finally, for the forgiveness and reconciliation which are the ultimate goal of Jesus' teaching.

It is this commitment to forgiveness and reconciliation which most benefits from the telescoping effect of enlisting the tools of conflict transformation. These tools effectively counteract and overcome the three major deterrents of reconciliation: the predilection for speed, the desire for distance, and the illusion of innocence (Katongole and Rice 2008). Hence, the greatest benefit to contemporary churches of this conversation is the identification of key skills which flesh out and give contemporary outworking to Jesus' commands in ways that attend to individual psychosocial dynamics as well as the complexities of congregational life.

Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusions

This thesis began with the story of a church in conflict. The story highlighted the weaknesses of a problem-solving approach to conflict. Mediators, counsellors and lawyers were engaged to resolve the issues and much needed structural changes were made, yet ultimately, the relational dis-ease stirred up by the conflict was not addressed and the congregation declined. In light of the intervening chapters, it is clear that the missing key in this story, the key to not only lasting resolution of the conflict through the healing of relationships, but the key to the conflict being a catalyst for strengthening that congregation, is a theologically integrated framework for understanding and addressing conflict. The purpose of this thesis was to deepen the conversation between conflict theory and theology in order to provide the basis on which such a framework might be developed.

An in-depth exegesis of Matthew 18 showed that, far from being a peremptory, even harsh, procedure for dealing with offences in the worshipping community, Matthew 18:15-20 is a transforming initiative capable of breaking the cycles of conflict that congregations get stuck in. Significantly, the three stage process, designed to enlist the help of ever widening circles of fellow believers in the quest for reconciliation, is nested in images and parables which embody Jesus' expectations of those who would belong to his kingdom. Humility, self-discipline, loving concern for others, and a predisposition to forgive nurtured by gratitude for the forgiveness received from God, are not only signs of true belonging to God's kingdom, but the very attitudes that enable the

process in verses 15-20 to be transformative for both the individuals and the worshipping community they belong to.

It was this notion of individual and communal transformation that set transformational approaches to conflict apart in the second chapter. Adversarial and resolution approaches, which view conflict in negative terms, are focussed on problem-solving and generally miss the opportunities for transformation that come from viewing conflict as a catalyst for positive change. Acknowledging that many congregations employ adversarial decision-making procedures and take a resolution approach to conflict, I nevertheless showed that transformation's concern to address not only the content but the relational and structural context of conflict makes it eminently more suited to the needs of congregations.

The final chapter brought the teachings of the Matthean Jesus into conversation with conflict transformation theory and practice, in an effort to better meet the needs of contemporary churches facing conflict. This conversation shed new light on how transformation's commitment to empowerment and recognition might be theologically nuanced in light of Matthew 18. Moreover, transformations' vision to "end something destructive and build something desired" (Lederach 2003:33) is both clarified and enlarged by Jesus' teaching. It is clarified in the sense that anything which damages the relationships between believers needs to be taken up in the process Jesus describes. The end of the process is also clarified in it's commitment to persevere until the offender is restored to the community and/or the estranged are reconciled. And it is enlarged by the eternal perspective of God's kingdom. How congregations address conflict not only impacts their temporal health, but

their capacity to fulfil the mandate to be agents of reconciliation in the world (II

Cor. 5:16-20) and, ultimately, their place in God's eternal kingdom (Matt. 18:35).

Finally, skills developed within the field of conflict transformation flesh out the

Matthew 18 process and provide the means to overcome the predilection for

speed, the desire for distance, and the illusion of innocence (Katongole and

Rice 2008) which so often preclude reconciliation.

In 2006 Mark Thiessen-Nation signalled the need for "future

conversations regarding the interface of theology and conflict

transformation"(2006:11). I have endeavoured to deepen this conversation as it

pertains to congregational conflict. This thesis puts forward an applied theology

from which congregations might develop their own framework for responding to

conflict. As Brian Bloch (2009) points out, too few faith-based organizations

(such as churches) have a framework in which the many resources available

might be understood and utilised in an integrated way. It is my hope that this

thesis might contribute toward that end.

Lederach (2003) highlights the critical role that a conceptual framework

plays in the transformative endeavour.

> … we need a conceptual framework that … permits us to connect the
> presenting problems with the deeper relational patterns. Such a
> framework can provide an overall understanding of the conflict, while
> creating a platform to address both the presenting issues and the
> changes needed at the level of the deeper relational patterns (Lederach
> 2003:11).

Hence, one final question remains. In light of the conversation between Jesus'

teaching on conflict and conflict transformation theory and practice, what might

a framework for addressing congregational conflict include? This question is the

basis for conversations beyond this thesis. However, I would like to kick-off the conversation by offering the following suggestions.

First, the framework might contain a clear articulation of what is being envisioned and built. The values of the kingdom of God, including the commitment to reconciliation and restoration, need to function as the primary reference point in any framework for addressing congregational conflict. This would include an understanding of both the individual and corporate identity of congregational members as followers of Jesus who are committed to their ongoing transformation into his likeness.

Second, it might contain a relational covenant for how believers will conduct themselves in the worshipping community. Beginning with humility, due respect, a willingness to listen and to speak the truth in love. Such a covenant could also include the individual and communal spiritual practices or disciplines they will engage in so as to nurture and sustain their commitment to it. In prioritizing what processes a congregation might utilize in a conflict situation, the processes would then be employed according to the extent to which they promote the values of the envisioned kingdom and how its members will interact with one another.

Third, a framework needs to include a clear process for addressing conflict when it does arise. The three steps Jesus outlines need to be fleshed out with a range of processes which are consistent with the theological and ecclesiological priorities of the congregation or denomination. If Jesus' teaching is to be the primary reference point, it may be that the congregation's understanding of how it might outwork its ecclesiological priorities is adjusted in

the process of developing such a framework. Clarity at this point would enable a congregation to make decisions about which particular processes are appropriate for each stage, as well as offering the flexibility to trial emerging processes, such as narrative mediation, in responding to particular conflict situations. In other words, such a framework would allow for responsive flexibility in the short term, while maintaining a steady commitment to the vision of the kingdom in the longer term.

Finally, a framework for understanding and addressing congregational conflict would ideally attend to the need for ongoing training of congregational members and leaders. A starting point might be to articulate a clear rationale for prioritizing theologically integrated conflict transformation education in theological colleges and seminaries, but also as part of ongoing vocational development for ministry personnel. After all, the effectiveness of whatever framework is adopted will depend on the extent to which its implementers understand the rationale and are skilled in its practices.

Jesus' teaching on conflict in Matthew 18 began in response to his disciples' question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"(Matt. 18:1). This thesis has shown that, in the question of how the contemporary church might address conflict, the answers lie not only in the process Jesus taught his followers, but in a deeper understanding of the kind of kingdom Jesus embodied and his expectations of how its members would live with a clear sense of their own standing before God and one another. Likewise, for contemporary followers of Jesus, engagement with the process in Matthew 18 during times of conflict provides the means (the transforming initiative) for a deeper understanding of God's kingdom and their place in it as they work to "end

something destructive and build something desired in its place"(Lederach 2003:33). Engaging conflict in this positive, transformational and biblically grounded way , then becomes the hallmark of, as Marshall eloquently puts it, "a people prepared to be radically different from the world around it" (2003:20), of lives "*modelled on Jesus* and bearing witness to the transforming reality of the *kingdom of God*" (Marshall 2003:22).

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