

Will division in the nation spill over to divide the church?

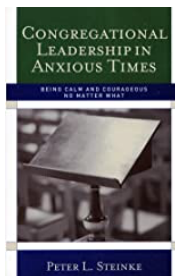
Some thoughts on keeping congregations united in mission.

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Having served for some decades as a church conflict consultant and coach I have observed what happens in churches when tensions from outside or inside begin to influence the unity of congregations. I want to suggest some thoughts that might help pastors and church leaders as they manage the climate in our culture and country in 2021.

Please use this document as a discussion starter with your leaders. Contact me if I can help!

- **Perception** is always at the forefront as tensions increase. There is an old saying that **Perception leads to Behavior leads to Destiny**. Or as the scripture points out “as a man thinks so is he”. (Prov. 23:7) We have seen this played out almost daily, often to the detriment of people whose perception led to actions that impact them and others. Fact and truth are often far less important than perceptions about them which lead people to the actions they take. Thinking that fact and truth are the key to behavior and destiny can be a blinding factor in our judgment and lead us to wrong conclusions.
- **Anxiety** is the driving force in most conflict and cultural tension. Once I stopped looking at people as “good or bad” and instead gauged their anxiety I became more effective as a leader and manager of conflict. The reality is that our culture, country and churches are filled with anxiety in 2020 and now 2021. The solution is not to lay blame but to deal with my own anxiety and try with God’s help to be a non-anxious presence. I learned about the reality of anxiety in all systems from Dr. Peter Stienke and others. You may want to read one of his books on this important reality:



- **Polarization** is often the result of faulty perception and rampant anxiety driving people apart and putting them at odds with each other. Our culture and country are surely as polarized as I have seen in my 75 years of life. The more polarized a group becomes the more difficult it is to manage tensions. The difficulty is that those on one pole or side can only see the good in their viewpoint and the bad in the other pole’s viewpoint. They are seldom able to see the negative side of their view and the positive of the other viewpoint. Bringing the anxiety down with the hope that sides will think and talk together is the challenge of leadership at every level. The goal for pastors and lay leaders is to manage the external polarity we see in the culture so that it does not become the defining issue in a congregation. The challenge is keeping secular viewpoints or even earthly parties from overshadowing the message and centrality of Christ’s love and place in the congregation and in our personal lives.

- **The Internet + Social Media** while a great blessing in our times and in my work can also be the Devil's workshop. Many congregations would not be able to worship in 2020/21 without them. But in every conflicted congregational situation I have worked with these gifts have been used by anxious people and the "Deceiver" to ramp up the anxiety and misunderstanding driving people to polarization. If leaders do not address this issue it will continue to seriously harm relationships and unity.

I wonder if we Lutherans don't have one formula to manage it in the very words of Martin Luther in his meaning to the **8th Commandment**.

"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor."

What does this mean? **We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.**

I know this was not always easy for Luther to accomplish nor is it for me especially as tension and anxiety increase. But it is a powerful statement and antidote for polarization and the best path to building healthy relationships. Jesus implored his disciples to speak the truth in love to each other but always directly – person to person. For Christians it should also guide and influence all of our communication, even the digital.

- **Servant Leadership** was always Jesus' method. His personal mission statement may have read, **"I came not to be served but to serve and give my life as a ransom for many."** I have been hearing this message, if ever so infrequently, from some of the leaders of our country. We also saw it played out after Epiphany on January 7 in the actions of Representative Andy Kim who spent a few hours with a plastic bag on his knees helping clean up the mess in the Capital building. I think we uniquely have this message of **servant leadership and servant living** to proclaim. It was Jesus' method amidst the anxiety and culture wars of his own day. I came not to be served but to serve! That may be the very best way for the Christian Church to influence our culture and world in these times. But it must become true in our behavior and actions not just in our perceptions.
- **Uncorking** the anxiety and pain is the last thought I have to share. One of my conflict teachers Dr. John Savage said that whenever he worked with conflicted congregations, after listening to people for hours over days, he would put his learnings into a written report with the hope it would **uncork** the pain and anxiety. The uncorking allowed people to step out of their perceptions and see the reality of situations. I used his method as do most conflict consultants. In our present cultural situation, we are only able to do that by starting with ourselves. One suggestion my wife gave me was to find a trusted friend who will listen and on occasion buy him lunch or a cup of coffee and just vent my frustrations, anxiety and anger. It is a good suggestion for pastors to do individually and to model for their members.
- As hard as it is to manage all of this such management is critical if we hope to keep from having a divided church. Our challenge is to influence the culture for Jesus Christ!