Resilient Tents of Meeting

Conflict Resilience and Reconciling Presence
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How do we nurture our people, our communities, our children, to become conflict-resilient? In this session I’m seeking to apply some of the principles we’ve raised and explored theologically thus far – and I shall do so with reference to one particular situation with which I’ve been closely involved for the past 8 years.

I have spent the past 18 years in education of one sort or another – undergraduate, postgraduate and theological college. Thankfully (for me) not just pursuing academic interest areas, research ratings and teaching quality. But in shaping communities of learning. That is, so organizing people – students - to maximize effective relations, to ground their learning in 3-D. We all know that life is not just about checking boxes – passing exams or meeting bishops’ requirements – yet how to ‘grow’ character remains the million dollar question.

Let me just set the scene a little. Duke Divinity School is in Durham NC – an ecumenically-mixed body of 600 or so postgrad students, all of them preparing for some kind of professional pastoral ministry in the Church. The school is one of several vocational schools – the business school, the law school, the medical school – located in the very centre of a gothic wonderland, a campus university built in the 1930s. The Divinity School is academically rigorous, confessionally passionate and bursting with eclectic students in their 20s. So imagine, perhaps, some kind of cross between an Oxbridge college, a Wesleyan revival meeting and the Edinburgh Festival fringe – soaked in sunshine and a Southern drawl. For me that mixture helpfully renegotiates some of our tired British churchmanship categories, though of course the US has plenty of its own. Within the methodological landscape of theological education it would bear a reputation for two particular emphases: a broad commitment to Scripture and its theological interpretation; and a clear voice for virtue ethics, that is, for the sort of ethics that focuses not on decision-making but on habit and character formation.

Now this is relevant background for the work with which I was charged: to establish an Anglican House – a centre, a college if you like that allows for some distinctive ethos, an Anglican spiritual formation - within the wider school, where approx. half the students are Methodist and the next biggest groups are Baptist and Anglican. Except that, in 2005 – in the wake of the election of Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire – you have to be very very careful how you use the word Anglican. Some Episcopalians are rejoicing at a breakthrough for justice but disturbed to find themselves ostracized by Anglicans elsewhere around the Communion. Others are negotiating their path of escape from the Episcopal Church for its recent departure from orthodoxy, keen to identify
themselves with all other Anglicans except Episcopalians. And both types exist at Duke Divinity School, and at least back in 2005 you could just about get away with calling any of them by either and both descriptors. But tectonic plates were shifting – as indeed they continue to shift. It is a dubious privilege to claim expertise in the alphabet soup that has ensued, and to dance your way into friendships where the parties are divorcing. I cannot pretend I was not a protagonist, but certainly it can pay to be the alien stranger.

I recall one half of a phone call that interrupted a walk I was taking with a visiting vicar to talk about his ordinand. I knew it was a difficult period for this rector, as he and his staff and congregation were discerning whether to stay in the Episcopal Church or to affiliate elsewhere. A call came in from his bishop and I found myself party to some exchanges I might have otherwise preferred not to hear. Except that the reception wasn’t great. So a serious conversation of great moment was spiced with ‘excuse me but could you just repeat that…’ and ‘I can’t hear you’. The memorable line for me was ‘I’m sorry but you’re breaking up’. I did not dare point out the irony. Afterwards he simply said to me ‘I think we got cut off’ which seemed to sum up the situation beautifully – neatly ducking responsibility on either side of a growing chasm. Of course in situations like this it is usually the other person’s phone ...

So the Anglican Episcopal House of Studies, as it became known, was born amidst a storm – quite literally, in the autumn of hurricane Katrina – but within a well-established ‘big steeple’ institution that speaks of the big-C Church more than the variety of small c institutions from which it draws students (an example of conflict being normal but not definitive – see yesterday’s address). In fairly short order, we drew growing numbers of both ‘liberals’ and ‘conservatives’ across the Anglican-Episcopal spectrum – a few of whom came despite the presence of the other, and others of whom came because of the presence of the other, all of whom longed for an immersion in Scripture and tradition (the level of motivation is high when you’re paying for your education yourself). In a church marketplace deeply shaped by consumer choice, the mixture was seen to be unusual, at the least. My parody of the telephone conversation just about sums up the kind of communication going on between the ‘parents’ in the divorce; the problem is they meet only in the courtroom or pseudonymously on blogsites. The expression VUCA– coined by the US military to describe the global political context of the 90s, standing for vulnerable, uncertain, complex and ambiguous – describes it well. Now, how can these circumstances bring out the best? What of the young people in these circumstances - those without the decision making powers, yet with idealism and imagination a-plenty for creating a better world: For children of divorce, seeking to outnarrate the problems of their parents? Here are the resources for growth in godliness.

Early on I felt privileged to be invited to meet and greet a group of six bishops drawn from a regional cluster of Episcopal Church dioceses on their private retreat. I drove for hours to make my 20 minute pitch on the exciting new venture at Duke while - I could tell - they were furiously sussing out this stranger in their midst. ‘Who ordained you?’ one of them asked, not a matter that had ever felt significant before. Another jokingly wondered if Archbishop Rowan had sent
me across the pond, whether to spy or to restrain them. Fair enough. My
disappointment lay in the fact that the conversation hardly focused on spiritual
formation and its cutting edges, as I had dreamed. As I departed their Southern
courtesy knew no bounds – you recognise that distancing technique, I'm sure -
until the one who kindly walked me to my car spoke up outside in the car park:
'Do you have any idea what you're doing? You're playing with fire. Some of those
people are very dangerous. We've all got court cases pending – they're stealing
our property. The last thing I want is my candidates for ordination hanging out
with those guys. I do want them to get a good theological education, but I also
want to know that I can rely on my future clergy.'

Rather conservative, for self-confessing liberals I thought – but I found this
reaction on all sides. In a climate of fear, everyone who is not with us is against
us (ie. Matthew not Mark – see yesterday’s plenary) – thus a hard-to-pin-down
piggy-in-the-middle such as myself is assumed by each to belong to the other. I
listened plenty long enough in all quarters to recognise there were plenty of
good reasons – highly principled religious reasons, as well as sheer battle-
weariness - for the mistrust and the conflict avoidance. Yet, when it comes to the
Jeremiah extremes – hatred or shalom - the choice is no longer ours. Jesus gives
very few direct commands (one is to ‘do this in remembrance of me’): and
another is: love your enemies and pray for their shalom, even while they are
persecuting you (Matt 5:44)

All of this may not sound like a promising start for an Anglican Episcopal House
of Studies. Quite the reverse, I want to suggest! We had our work cut out, and we
could not avoid it – or each other. Hallelujah! The perfect storm – so long as you
can stand the heat (and my mixed metaphors). And my task today is to try to
convince you, through this small worked example, how conflict may be a gift. A
gift for spiritual formation. Which is to say, a gift for growing in the character of
godliness. And if conflict can be constructive, then conflict-resilience ought not to
be, in the immortal words of Archbishop Rowan speaking about his successor,
about growing the skin of a rhinoceros. That would be to get tough, to become
less sensitive to difference – whereas I’m talking about a heightened awareness
and receptivity that forces us to pause, to drop whatever agenda we thought was
more important than valuing our neighbor and the questions he or she brings.
BTW, whilst I reject the rhinoceros I think Archbishop Justin does need the
constitution of an ox, which was the other thing +RW hoped for.

So this is about a capacity, a disposition, to receive challenge and turn it to
growth. I think we call that discipleship. It’s about pitching your tent in the midst
of things – seemingly on unstable ground - where you seek to become a tent of
meeting, whether for friend or stranger. I use the image of a tent quite
intentionally: it is the image for the incarnation in John 1, of the Word-made-
flesh tabernacling with us. Which is related to the way Paul describes each
believer as a temple of the Holy Spirit – the locus of the ministry of
reconciliation. I like the image because a tent is fragile, vulnerable, flexible,
adaptable. It is stabilized by guy ropes which must be taut – stretched, if you
like, between lament and hope, between earth and heaven, between the mire and
the glory. And in that stretch, some tension, some cost, some sacrifice. If the tent is resilient and receptive it’s because the guy ropes are kept taut.

Yesterday's habits for conflict resilience on the basis of Jeremiah and co were lament, sacrifice and hope. So today – when it comes to putting them into practice – here is what they look like, worked out in the context of the Anglican Episcopal House of Studies. A case study of Indaba, if you like – the listening process borrowed from an African tribal context that has proved so strategic around the Anglican Communion on macro and micro levels – translated to some bright young sparks who are otherwise impatient, impetuous, and idealistic for the work of God.

These come under the headings of relationships, commitment and imagination.

1) Relationships.
If lament is about having a free and frank with God; then the practice of lament ought to be the foundation for cultivating honesty – fierce conversation - in all other relationships.. Lex orandi, lex vivendi?! We do not protect anyone, ultimately, by not speaking the truth. Nettles are for grasping - or their sting keeps on stinging.

No substitute for good relationships. Conflict is healthy where relationships are strong, and destructive where relationships are weak.
Now, when it comes to lament: we were talking yesterday about direct conversation, face-to-face – think of Moses in that tent of meeting at Sinai. So too with one another: I mean face-to-face conversation and embodied engagement. We’re not talking about facebook friendships. The ease of modern communication has had the unfortunate consequence of increasing the capacity for conflict and diminished the capacity for relationship building – because being ‘in touch’ seems to have little to do with real touch. Learn from your dog, I say, who is just not interested in a phone call... Our dog is passionate about incarnation, in embodied realities – a real-life walk.

Most of us need help, some structure, to nurture relationships beyond our intimate circle, to rescue us from nepotism. The coffee hour after church doesn’t cut the ice... it’s far too self-selecting; and you can’t talk properly standing up. What we created at Duke was, essentially, a kind of Indaba – to enable the listening learning process in the way students interacted at worship, in lectures, over meals and in practical service.

We established some ‘rules’ – two most important ones were “don’t sit on it” – if you have a critique or a concern that might fester then raise it (with the speaker) now; (an antidote to Southern civility that smiles sweetly until you’re so desperate you get out the gun)
– and “don’t say about x what you haven’t/can’t say directly to X”
And sometimes we may need to be banished from blogsites – I encouraged my students to try it as a form of Lenten fasting.
All of this was followed through in ‘pod’ groups – small groups of 3 to be ‘Peter James and John’ to one another – transparency and accountability. Self-righting mechanisms

The Anglican Episcopal House became the envy of other denominational groupings at Duke Div, precisely because people could see that we disagreed yet we loved one another. The basis still lay in prayer – corporate lament. Overall it’s about pursuing honesty and overcoming fear – fierce conversation. So hard yet so freeing. And magnetic in attraction...

Jesus became flesh and tabernacled among us. Relationships create safe space – into which strangers are welcomed as potential friends, not enemies. This is the test: do the relationships create the space – the tents of meeting, if you like – where anyone can be welcomed in...? There is the sign of reconciled people, even if they are still different diverse people... They are engaging together in the work of sharing God’s blessing with the outsider (then it becomes evangelism, if you like)

2) Commitment
If the key criteria for discerning a call to ministry is ‘how much am I ready to sacrifice?’ then one surprising detail that was very very helpful to my work at the AEHS: the fees for tuition at Duke Divinity School! (More like buying the BMW than the Ford Fiesta)
Self-selecting group of those who were committed to the model and the mix, no matter the cost... If you weren’t prepared to give something up, no point participating.

Commitment was to a period of time – just as with a mediation exercise, only for a period of three years – long enough for relational practices to become engrained, habit-forming
Very careful to gauge among the applicants the openness to learn, not just from professors but from fellow students of differing stripes (I had the luxury of being selective)
Commitment wasn’t to some notional end of ‘agreement’ – a vegetable soup - whereby our diversity is translated into some level uniformity (very few people changed their views or affiliations – what mattered was ‘growing where you’re planted’)
Yet we shared a common objective – v impt -commitment - to become faithful pastors/priests (so main focus isn’t on conflict) – a pathway to bless one another with ease away from the horizons of conflict

Other shared commitments (again, the structures of common life):
Daily office – BCP – don’t hold these up to ransom
rules/requirements of participation – presence was obligatory
some clear non-negotiables – if there is clarity in some areas, this increases
tolerance where lack of clarity/security in others

up front terms on which people came ‘don’t come here if you don’t think you’ve got anything to learn from others in the community who are different from you’
authority and obedience – bishops, director
leadership – no one avoided my leadership, incl those who were not happy with
women as priests or women as head (thankfully there were of course other
spectra of diversity, not just the gay debate)
not interested in defining ‘where people stand’/staking ground – room to move,
drift, lurk, grow

3) Imagination
If hope is to be embraced deeply, we have to grow our individual and corporate
imagination, and exercise it regularly. Like prayer, like conversation, I think of
that as a spiritual practice.
Now, in an educational institution that ought to work well. Communities of
learning are about feeding/stretching the mind (‘be transformed, by the
renewing of your mind’) – though as I see it we are in danger of going lite when it
comes to the academics, out of fear of intellectualism. Yet to communicate clearly
– simply – we need to understand deeply. We cannot renew our hopefulness if it
is not informed and not renewed. Steeped in tradition – so that we can be
faithfully new
And without imagination and learning we will never inhabit the theological
truths, the ultimate realities - which is vital if we are to overcome the present
political realities that dominate others’ horizons

Our imaginations are also fired by experience. That experience must be wide –
and ever pushed to go wider (that won’t happen by itself) – to encompass the
stranger.
The wider context for us at AEHS included recognising ourselves as a kind of
stranger, guests, in an institution that was founded for Methodists – great
leveler; no one has prior rights. It’s all grace. Other’s commitment to us
Friendships with Sudan
Right brain activity – initiatives in the arts; sport;

Embracing the imagination is about being willing to go beyond your zone of
control – mentally or physically or spiritually
It’s about nurturing idealists not apologizing for that idealism. Resisting
cynicism, yet welcoming those who do not buy the status quo
VUCA world – key is adaptability,
Secure in the tradition... allows freedom and imaginative in embracing it afresh
The imagination to live into a different reality: not to adopt the sins or cynicism
of our forebears. By the time I left, most of the students coming in were not those
who were party to a divorce – they were still in school when Gene Robinson was
elected! Do we really want them to follow in the path of their parents or might
they “do different”?

A visiting bishop put it: ‘Duke is preparing leaders for a church that doesn’t exist’
‘Maybe you’re right’ I replied, reluctantly.
It was one of those comments that stuck with me – couldn’t shake the criticism
off. Until, in repeating it later, I realized that bishop was absolutely right, far
more right than he perhaps realised. Our task is to prepare people for a church
that doesn’t currently exist – so that it may come to exist.
Back to Duke’s emphasis on theological reading of Scripture; and virtue ethics:
Few students changed their minds – that is NOT what this is about
But hard to find anyone who doesn’t deeply respect those who differ, not simply
as people of integrity whom they know and love, but also people with whom
they’ve studied Scripture and sought the things of God – to whom they quite
possibly owe a debt for help in embracing their salvation. When that happens,
you simply can’t dismiss the other as ‘not taking Scripture seriously’
Habit formation: pod groups that carry on; friendships that blossom despite the
party lines, sermons that are exchanged, retreats that are shared – marathons
that are run! Pulpits that are switched...
So the divisions are tentative, temporary, unsatisfactory – not givens, not
definitive
And the practices of indaba – of listening, sharing – are a lifestyle

Paul encourages us to be transformed, by the renewing of our minds. That
transformation is the work of the Spirit but it takes a lot of cooperation from us –
in habits of lament, sacrifice, hope, in the disciplined practices of relationships,
commitments, and imagination. And the logic of 2 Cor 5 on reconciliation, is that
when we are transformed – actually, when we’re in the process of being
transformed, far from the finished product – so we function as agents of
transformation, ambassadors of reconciliation.

As the Father sent me, says Jesus, so I send you.
The habits of conflict resilience, it turns out, are not just about us. They’re about
others, those who haven’t the first idea that transformation is on offer.

[End with Inbaba prayer]