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BEING THE CHURCH:
Facing Divisive Issues Without Dividing the Body of Christ

With a foreword by Dr. Walter B. Shurden

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Introduction

My hometown, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, is about an hour's drive from Carson Newman University. I first met Walter (Buddy) Shurden when he was a professor at Carson Newman and the speaker for my training union class. (I'll pause while some of you Google "training union.") When I enrolled at C-N, Dr. Shurden was my professor for several classes, including Baptist History. One of our texts was Dr. Shurden's book, *Not a Silent People: Controversies That Have Shaped Southern Baptists.* The first chapter is entitled "Here Come the Battling Baptists."

If you have been a Baptist for long, you have witnessed or heard of those contentious business meetings where tension was high, and a vote divided the body of Christ. That's the way it has always been, but does that make it *right*? Is *Robert's Rules of Order* even mentioned in the New Testament? We Baptists have a long tradition of what Dr. Bill Leonard calls "multiplication by division."[1] We deal with conflict by majority rule, and the minority is often so hurt and disenfranchised that they pack up and leave to start a new congregation. Is there, as Paul said, a "more excellent way" to approach difficult questions facing our congregations? Surely, we should be able to make decisions without dismembering the body of Christ.

I had the privilege of walking with a church that handled a potentially divisive topic in such a way that the vote was merely a formality. As I got to know this congregation, I was amazed by its diversity in age, race, political leanings and even theological stances. Republicans and Democrats, Conservative and Liberal, all following Jesus and worshipping

[1] Bill J Leonard, "Baptist brokenness: Reconciliation and revolution," February 14, 2018, "Baptist News Global," [https://baptistnews.com/article/baptist-brokenness-reconciliation-revolution/#.WosypqinE2w]

together. Their pastor reminds them to always "keep the main thing, the main thing," and that main thing is Christ as Lord.

In the pages that follow, I will share with you what I have learned from this and from other churches who have intentionally faced a difficult question and done so successfully. Some of these steps and ideas were planned before the church discussion and some were stumbled upon as a result of heavenly direction. These words are offered in the hope that they will give some direction to the steps your church takes into and out of troubled waters.

When I began to work on this project, I asked Dr. Shurden to write an article to address those battling Baptists. That article, which follows, is a fitting foreword for this document.

Foreword

Facing Hard Questions in a Democratically-Run Baptist Church
By
Walter B. Shurden
Minister-at-Large, Mercer University

Facing explosive issues creates grim times for Christians of all kinds. It has always been so. It is no different for Baptists. The first book I ever wrote was entitled *Not a Silent People: Controversies That Have Shaped Southern Baptists.* The first chapter of that book I called "Here Come the Battling Baptists." **Controversies! Battling!** Baptists, like all other Christians and religions in general, have had to face painfully divisive issues. How do we do that in a democratically run local Baptist church?

Maybe the first thing to say is that no other person, organization, or religious body can decide hot-button issues for a local Baptist church. An association of churches, a state convention, or a national convention of Baptists may declare their own conclusions on controversial concerns. They cannot, however, dictate to a Baptist church how that local church must decide such issues. Those religious groups may even exclude a local Baptist church for arriving at different conclusions. Those organizations cannot, however, force their will upon a local Baptist church.

A second thing to say is that most local Baptist churches dread too much confronting facing tough issues. We want harmony. We want unity. We fear numerical decline if we tackle problematic questions. But for a local Baptist church there is something more important than harmony and numerical growth. What is that? It is obedience to the Living Christ. Rather than viewing all divisive matters as "problems" that stir up the church, we ought to entertain the idea

that such “problems” may be the nudging of the Spirit of God. That happened in the first century to the earliest Christians.

When Peter, James, Paul, Barnabas and those other followers of Christ met in Jerusalem to face the fiery issue of accepting Gentiles without forcing Jewish circumcision upon them, they faced one of the most critical and controversial questions that Christians have ever faced. Emotions ran high. Convictions were strong on both sides. Some forcefully argued that “it is necessary to circumcise” non-Jews and “to charge them to keep the law of Moses” before those Gentiles could be welcomed in the church. But Paul and Barnabas responded with a “No.” They would not allow exclusion of Gentiles on the basis of circumcision. The belligerent parties reached a decision that altered the future of Christianity. They opened the doors to uncircumcised Gentiles because as they said, “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” It is not too much to say that the Spirit of God had led them into creating a bigger, more inclusive, and more welcoming church than they ever imagined (Acts 15:1-21).

In my 60 years in the ministry, local white Baptist churches of the South have vigorously argued over incendiary issues such as racial integration, the role of women, the nature of worship, and the interpretation of the Bible. All have been divisive. Most of them, however, have made the church a more inclusive and hospitable place. Might these have been the nudging of the Spirit of Christ?

When facing hot-button issues a local Baptist church might consider four approaches: education, conversation, negotiation, and, finally, participation in the democratic process. No controversial issue should be faced in a local church without a thorough effort at educating the congregation on all sides of the issue. When my church voted three decades ago on ordaining women as deacons, we spent four Wednesday evenings hearing experts talk about the issue from

all sides, biblical, cultural, and personal. Even the educational process may be divisive but knowing all sides of an issue is important before proceeding.

A second step is conversation. Members of the local church should have an opportunity to discuss the issues face to face. While threatening to almost everyone, to sit around tables and hear each other's stories about why they feel as they do about volatile concerns is life giving to a church. It is amazing how these conversations often become bonding rather than dividing times.

Thirdly, if possible, the church should negotiate and try to find a win-win for all sides. No decision will ever satisfy everyone, but this should not keep us from looking and praying for ways to help the church to come closer together. In the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15, it was not winner take all. Actually, a compromise was reached.

A number of local churches have debated the presence of the American flag in the sanctuary. Some see the flag as projecting nationalism above the universalism of the Christian faith. They remember how the swastika played such a prominent and vulgar role in German churches during the time of Hitler. Others believe that a wholesome patriotism does not undermine the universality of the faith. One church that faced this issue decided to place the flag in the sanctuary on significant national holidays but to keep it in the Fellowship Hall the rest of the time. That was the result of negotiation.

Finally, Baptists are Congregationalists in church polity and government. They are democratic. The members of the congregation decide all significant issues. It is not the pastor who decides, nor the deacons, nor the church council. Each member in a Baptist church has both a right, and a responsibility to vote. It is better, however, for that vote to be taken after the education, conversation, and negotiation have taken place.

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In the Beginning… There Was Conflict

We Baptists have our beginnings in Holland and England during the 17th century. It was a time of radical change. In 1543, the publication of Nicolaus Copernicus' *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*, began the Scientific Revolution. It followed on the heels of the Protestant reformation and marked the beginning of an era that saw reason and logic stand up to the princes, kings, and popes who had dominated Europe for centuries. Puritans sought to reform the Church of England while the Separatists gave up on the Church of England and left to form their own congregations. In 1609, some of those Separatists, after instituting believer's baptism, became known as Baptists.[2]

Given this context, it should be no surprise that these Baptists cherished their independence and established a form of church governance based on the priesthood of *all* believers. "No bishop or pastor or pope or conference of churches or civil government had a say-so over the religious affairs of a Baptist congregation."[3] Every believer is to have a say in decisions made for the body. *Aye, there's the rub.* If I, as a believer, can speak to the Almighty and attempt to discern his will, then YOU as a believer have the same right. Occasionally, you and I will disagree on a matter, while being *absolutely certain* that our opinion is God's opinion.

If the point of contention is the color of carpet for the sanctuary, the winners and losers may be able to get past the division and move forward. If, however, the question concerns a more contentious matter, the outcome of the vote might very well lead to a split, or a significant loss, in church membership.

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[2] Leon McBeth, "Baptist Beginnings," "Baptist History and Heritage Society," [http://www.baptisthistory.org/baptistorigins/baptistbeginnings.html]

[3] Walter B. Shurden, "Turning Points in Baptist History," 2009, "The Center of Baptist Studies," [http://www.centerforbaptiststudies.org/pamphlets/style/turningpoints.htm].

"We are at point A and we want to get to point B, but no one agrees on what point B actually is."[4] (Upon closer examination, we might discover that we do not all have the same interpretation of point A either!) For a typical Baptist church, we solve this dilemma by announcing a business meeting (maybe sending it to a committee first,) then calling for the question. In our democratic fashion, each member responds by voting for or against a version of point B. All too often, when the vote is finished, the body of Christ is divided into winners and losers.

Is That a Hill to Die On?

The question "Is that a hill you want to die on?" alludes to a soldier on the battlefield. As a soldier, it is your job to defend the high ground. Sometimes, however, that position isn't worth the loss of life, so you move on and regroup. I tend to get caught up in minutia, ready to die on each and every hill, rise and molehill, not keeping the "main thing," the main thing. It's important to figure out which positions are important enough to warrant a battle.

It might help to look back on those controversies that have divided and defined us as Baptists. As I mentioned earlier, Smyth and Helwys thought that mode of baptism was one of those hills and parted ways because of a difference of opinion. In May of 1845, Baptists in the south separated from those in the north over the right to commission a slaveholder as a missionary. In the late 1980s, the Southern Baptist Convention announced that the controversy was about the authority of Scripture, but the only scriptures under question were those speaking against the ordination of women.

[4] Matthew Freeman. Facilitator training, _____ Baptist Church, January 20, 2018

"[D]ifficult conversations are almost never about getting the facts right. They are about conflicting perceptions, interpretations, and values."[5] All sides of each controversy can be backed up with scripture, it's just a matter of how one interprets that scripture. All sides of each of these controversies can be backed up with scripture, it is just a matter of how one interprets that scripture.

Is there a hill that your church is presently dying on? Is it worth the sacrifice? For example, a conflict about Sunday School literature may be killing the congregation, but beneath it lie unreconciled differences between Sunday School teachers and the Sunday School Director. Making your church a safe place to tackle that conversation is nine tenths of the battle. If the parties are willing to talk about the real issue, forgiveness and compromise can follow.

I hear what you are thinking. "We will never get those folks to talk to each other." It will take some education from your church staff to get that ball rolling. In the next section, we will discuss how to make that happen.

Learning to Listen

How do we get our members to have these difficult conversations without splitting the congregation? I have already presented the dilemma produced by simply calling for a vote to answer a highly charged and difficult question. Typically, Baptist churches discuss the pros and cons of a question in the church parking lot, in Arby's after church, over the phone, but not as the Body of Christ. We are, in theory, believers in "…[t]he leadership of the Holy Spirit in

[5] Bruce Patton, Douglas Stone, and Sheila Heen, "Difficult conversations: how to discuss what matters most," in *Difficult conversations: how to discuss what matters most*(London: Portfolio/Penguin, 2011) 10, here 10

individual and corporate decisions…"[6] yet, the Spirit is seldom invited into the conversation until the prayer before the business meeting. Could there be an alternative to *Roberts' Rules of Order* that allows the local church to function as the Body of Christ without losing our individual voices?

Hearing the voice of each individual is a part of who we are. The pastor does not tell us who we are. The deacon board does not tell us who we are. We decide who we are going to be.

> *Baptists… based their call for religious liberty on the biblical view of persons. Created in the image of God, a human being is the crowning work of God's creation (Ps 8). Human personality is sacred and life's highest value. To deny freedom of conscience to any person is to debase God's creation.*[7]

That being said, as it stands now, the only time we officially hear a voice of dissent on any issue facing the church is in the speaking against a motion. That dissenting voice(s) just might be bringing God's will into the conversation. Each of the Old Testament prophets was called by God to be a dissenting voice. Jesus is the ultimate example of a dissenter, continually speaking love into a world of hate.

As a more "recent" example, John Woolman, a 16th century Quaker, spoke at Quaker meetings up and down the East Coast about the evils of slavery. For 30 years he was a single dissenting voice, patiently trying to persuade his fellow Quakers. In 1776 Quakers, at their yearly meeting in Philadelphia, officially prohibited the Society of Friends from owning slaves – two years after Wolman's death.

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[6] Paul D Simmons, "The Southern Baptist Tradition," in *Religious Beliefs and Health Care Decisions*

[7] Walter B. Shurden, "How We Got That Way," October 8, 1996, [http://centerforbaptiststudies.org/shurden/howwegotthatway.htm].

How do we know, as a church family, which voice to follow? It is certainly not possible if the voices are shouting at one another. It is only when we learn to listen to each member of the body that we find the truth.

Listening is more than hearing what others have to say. You might hear a train pass, think "There goes a train," and continue with what you are doing. It is another thing to listen to the sound of a train rumbling down the tracks, to notice the rhythmic sound as it passes over rail and trestle, and to deduce its passing as the sound fades into the distance. Listening is more than being quiet while others speak. There is an openness to listening: soaking up the words of another, rolling those thoughts around in our minds, holding them in tension with our own thoughts and beliefs without making judgments. There will be a time for judgments, but not while you're listening. A favorite saying of mine is, "Don't you load while I'm firing."

It requires the creation of a safe place to hear the voices on all sides of a question. For example, Elm Street Church gathered the anonymous stories of members whose lives has been touched by the question. Various leaders of the congregation read the stories aloud in the first person – as if it were their story. This personalized the stories, making them not about *outsiders*, but about *family.* Elm Street spent several weeks in what they called "Dessert and Dialogue" groups. These events, held in the homes of members, were led by a trained facilitator who used a variety of scripted questions aimed at encouraging the members to speak from their hearts and heads, instead of fear or anger.

From Listening to Discernment

Once your congregation has spent time listening to one another, you may feel that the time is right to move into collective discernment. To discern is to seek to find the will of God by opening up to hear that still, small voice (or, on occasion, the big, loud voice). This "opening" involves prayer for clarity, for vision, and for guidance. When we seek to know God's plan for our lives, discernment is God's gift of leadership to the next baby step on our path.

Corporate discernment involves the same practices and depends upon our cooperation with other members of the Body of Christ. I had the joy, honor, and aggravation of serving on my church's pastor search team. The nine of us could not have been more diverse – everything from a very shy homemaker to an industry executive. We received training in discernment and all appeared to be "on board." But, at our first meeting, the executive wanted take charge and run things like an efficient business meeting. I learned that his nickname at work was "The Hammer," and I really think that he knew no other way to operate. The first few weeks, I left our meetings so angry that a friend had to talk me off the ledge as we rode home together.

Week after week, we sat together as a team – talking, listening, thinking and praying. As members brought thoughts and ideas to the table, the rest of us, including the hammer, learned to really listen as they spoke, withholding any comment until we had silently prayed and thought about what had been said. By the time we called a pastor, unanimous in our decision, The Hammer and I were close friends, brother and sister in Christ. Through the process, we both had become more understanding, tolerant, and forgiving: much more Christlike.

What was there about this process that brought us closer together and closer to Christ? These three things come to mind -

1. A common purpose: It has been said that nothing unites like a common enemy. I believe that a common purpose has the same uniting effect. Though Lennon and McCartney feuded off-stage, they wrote some amazing songs; Watson and Crick fought, but together they discovered the double helix shape of DNA;

2. Praying together: *"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."* Matthew 18:20-22 (NRSV) I cannot even begin to count the number of times I have felt the presence of the Holy Spirit during corporate prayer. Initially, when my friends and I gathered as the Pastor Search Team, our prayer was superficial – "Blah, blah, please lead us. Blah, blah, right person. Blah, blah, Amen." As the search process deepened, so did our prayers. Names of candidates were brought before the Lord. Praises and pleas from the team were lifted up. Christ's presence was felt amongst his children;

3. Listening. Listening. Listening: At first, I could not wait until another member stopped sharing their opinion so that I could give mine. Mine, I was sure, was the most important and insightful. Everyone would benefit from hearing what I thought. Then, as the weeks passed, we all began to hang onto one another's words, turn them over in our minds, ask questions, and genuinely listen.

Depending upon the question, your congregation may need to proceed to a statement of approval/disapproval, yes/no, agree/disagree. To do this, a congregation must move from a season of discernment into a time of reaching consensus.

Finding Consensus

Consensus is just a fancy way of saying agreement – not a concept we hear much in Baptist churches. Our culture is that of winners and losers. We are all familiar with congregations that have split over a difficult question – integration, the ordination of women, interpretation of scripture, allegiance to a pastor. By building consensus, it is more likely that members will feel that they have had a say, and been heard, on the congregational response.

The leadership of Elm Street Church used a creative and effective way to get feedback from the group. Once again, this example comes from a church that was dealing with a potentially divisive question. After many conversations around dessert and in Bible study, the church leadership crafted a consensus statement that, they felt, represented the sentiments of the congregation. They then invited comments and suggestions from the membership and used that input to make changes. This process was repeated several times, with each occasion producing new important and insightful suggestions.

After all the rewrites, the church leadership passed out a voting tool created by a member of the congregation. On a legal sheet of paper, was drawn the picture of a clock with no numbers. In place of the numbers were written positions on the statement, ranging from total affirmation of the statement to total disagreement. Members were asked to draw a stick figure of themselves at some point on this circular continuum, and add a note if they felt so led. [8]Such a tool signifies that the members are not "at odds," but

[8] These documents are reprinted at the end of this document.

members of the same circle with differing opinions. It allows all the voices to be heard on a continuum between yes and no. For Elm Street Church, the vast majority of members found themselves between 12:00, complete agreement, and 3:00, few reservations, on the diagram. This information allowed the leadership to move forward.

Summary

To sum up these observations, and to offer assistance to churches willing to move into being the Body of Christ, here is a step-by-step list of tasks you might want to consider:

1. Name the Question – What question or conflict is preventing your congregation from acting as the Body of Christ?

2. Educate Yourselves – Whether it involves guest speakers, book study or Bible study, be equipped with something other than your opinion as you approach this task.

3. Design the Discussion – Begin the discussions with prescribed questions that will create a safe place for expressing experiences and beliefs while keeping opinions to a minimum.

4. Craft a Position Statement- Share the statement, ask for written feedback. Use that feedback to craft a second, third, fourth statement.

5. Call for Discernment – Using an instrument similar to the one shared in this document, take the temperature of your congregation concerning the statement. Use the responses to determine whether you need to rewrite the position statement or return to discussion and discernment.

Appendices

Testimonies

1

When I was growing up, my father was the pastor of a small country church. This was a Bible-believing, Jesus-sharing, knee-slapping, Gaither-singing congregation that loved Jesus, each other and me. One of my father's favorite sermon lines, a line that most of the

congregation could recite word for word, was "people who gamble, drink, smoke, divorce and party are all sinners bound for hell."

This was our church's mantra. This was a phrase fused deeply into our DNA. This list, these people, they were our mission field. Then my older brother got divorced. A couple of weeks after our family learned about the divorce, I noticed something. My father went to give his usual list of sinners but left out one specific category-those whom have had a divorce. When people face real-life experiences that challenge their preconceived notions, they are forced to come at issues from a different perspective. For my father, people who were divorced went from being "those people" to "my son," and his perspective changed.

I am a deacon at _____. Last year, our congregation engaged in an intentional conversation around the issue of _____. As you can imagine, we had people all over the page on the issue. One thing we learned quickly, was that this conversation was difficult to forecast. Grandparents who are conservative on most matters have grandkids feel differently than you would assume. We also have younger, more moderate millennials, whom you would expect to be more progressive, with views of scripture that were so stringent they struggled to see other perspectives.

For several weeks, members of _____ gathered around tables in homes sharing their stories and views on scripture and culture. These conversations brought to light how varied our experiences were. They were always civil yet oftentimes confrontational, too. There were no fistfights, but when we came face-to-face with real life experiences of one another, we could no longer avoid hard conversations. The biggest byproduct of these conversations was humility. What we learned was that no one owns the truth and none of us have such a

complete grasp on God that we can't be wrong. A majority of people chose not to dig in their heels to defend their viewpoint, rather they chose to listen and learn from other points of view. No one was demonized for his or her beliefs and no one was demonized for keeping their beliefs, even if they did not agree with the majority.

_____ Church takes faith formation seriously. Formation comes through growth and growth can only occur if there is a felt need to grow. Thus, if we have room to grow, we understand that we have not yet completed our task of becoming like Christ. Churches that have hard conversations must be made up of congregants that see themselves as not yet fully formed in faith thus, they see the need to continue to grow while staying humble.

The process at _____ was not perfect. Some members left the congregation, our budget decreased, our church family shrunk. Through this pain, though, our congregation felt the sense that we did something important and necessary. _____ journeyed through a tough conversation and survived. We know more hard conversations will come, but we also know that we have what it takes to handle these situations and move through them with humility.

2

Unity and Diversity: Consensus-Making for _____ Baptist Church

During my tenure at _____ Baptist Church as Minister of Spiritual Formation, we embarked on a months-long discernment process, culminating in 2017 with a congregational consensus statement regarding matters of _____. Looking back upon

it, the process was beautiful in the raw vulnerability that we, as members of a church family, showed in our honest, open sharing about our own opinions and lived experiences. That is not to say that it wasn't also very challenging and tense at times. There were moments where I became concerned that the entire process would fall apart. There were times where I grieved deeply the almost certain loss of some beloved members and friends from our congregation. As I look back at the whole of the process, however, I am very proud of our church, and the commitment that most of our members made to having this sort of difficult conversation together.

A key component of the process for us was that this was not really weeks- or months-long process. We started the conversation over a decade ago, with a Wednesday night series in 2005 on _____ and the Bible. We had another Wednesday night series in 2013 where we invited local Biblical scholars and theologians to walk us through key Scripture passages. During this second series, we also invited members of our own congregation to share personal stories. These stories were powerful and lent a personal note to what might otherwise be a strictly theoretical or theological conversation. Finally, in 2015 we had a comprehensive series on _____ that we podcast on our website to share more broadly. It included discussion of _____ and Scripture. During this series, we also prepared an extensive resource list of books, articles, and podcasts on various related topics for our congregation. All this to say, our congregation wrestled with questions related to _____ and faith for a long time.

For each of these series, we promised up front that there would be no vote at the end. We presented ground rules from the beginning, to guide our discussions together. They were

to be conversations, safe spaces to listen and to have honest dialogue. They were opportunities for all of us to become better informed as Christians. Our identity as Baptists suggests that we all have the right to read and interpret Scripture for ourselves. That right carries with it a significant responsibility for each of us to do the hard work of reading and educating ourselves about matters of interpretation.

Our pastoral staff did our best to shepherd everyone in our congregation through the process. We reached out to a few members who we knew would be very uncomfortable with this conversation happening at all—no matter how it ended. Clear communication, honesty, and openness were key ingredients throughout our process.

Our deacon board chose to use a consensus model as we moved forward. We didn't want to have a vote. Voting necessarily entails "winners" and "losers." We wanted everyone to feel as though their voices were heard. The consensus model entailed three or four Sunday evening sessions. We did not share new information about Biblical texts at these sessions: we felt like we had talked enough in the past about matters of Scripture and interpretation, and directed members to our podcasts and other resources as needed. Instead, we focused on telling personal stories, sharing around tables, and asking members to share questions and concerns with the deacons. We also held a series of facilitated in-home discussion groups (that included beverages and dessert) for members to share more personally with one another. After these various "listening sessions," the deacons commissioned a small group to sketch out a preliminary draft of a consensus statement, based on what they were hearing from church members. This draft was shared with members of the congregation, and the deacons invited feedback. Finally, a final draft of the consensus statement was shared with the congregation.

We did not "vote" to adopt it. Rather, members were invited to respond and share the extent to which they supported or disagreed with the statement, and whether or not they could "live with it" (to put it a bit crassly). Deacons collected these responses, and based on this, felt like we had achieved "consensus" as a congregation. This did not mean that we all agreed perfectly with the end-result. Rather, it meant that most of us felt comfortable with the final-form of the statement, and agreed that we could "live with it," even if we might have preferred a differently-worded statement that better captured our own nuanced opinions.

Maintaining unity in spite of differences is a key witness of the Church (John 17:20–23). Our country and our world have plenty to divide us, one from another. Baptist churches have, more often than not, it seems, followed the trend toward division. After all, we have so much within our faith that threatens to divide us. I suspect that I could find several key theological disagreements with very dear friends and family members if we spend much time talking about it. Instead, however, we choose to focus on what unites us: our common mission and our common belief in following the Way of Jesus. I believe this to the core of my being: *what we have that unites us together is stronger and more significant that all that threatens to divide us*. Or perhaps I could put it this way: *The One who unites us is greater than all that could separate us from one another.* Our particular Baptist church decided together that radical hospitality was in keeping with the example of Jesus' own ministry. We believe that extending God's hospitality to all demonstrates God's deep love for all of humanity. We have deep humility about our role in all of this, but we trust that God will bless our efforts, our successes, and our failures along the way.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

3

What, How, and Why: Leading Congregational Change

Congregational change is a difficult topic even in the best of circumstances. In many congregations, however, that difficulty level is needlessly heightened by a lack of clear vision.

On the face of it, that statement seems patently absurd. The whole reason a congregation experiences change is typically because someone has a clear vision for something new: the congregation is going to welcome _____ folks into membership, or perhaps the first female member of the ministerial staff is going to be hired. There is a clear sense that something big is going to happen. Most people usually know the what. It is much rarer that they know the how or the why.

In the first church I pastored after graduating from seminary, I made it clear to the deacons that I intended to change our communion practice from the more "traditional" Baptist method of plate passing to the more "liturgical" method of intinction (having the congregation come forward to receive the bread and dip it in a common cup). I carefully researched a purchased a pair of chalices. I wrote a meaningful communion liturgy. But when the big day finally arrived, more than a few people stayed in their seats during communion.

In the weeks afterward, I learned that this happened for two reasons. First, people didn't understand why we were making the change. There seemed to be no good reason to switch from passing the plate to practicing intinction. And second, people were concerned about germs. They knew what we were doing, but they didn't know how we were going to do it in a way that satisfied their legitimate hygiene concerns.

So, the next time we shared communion, I took time to address those concerns. I explained why my own theology of communion was best expressed in intinction, and why I wanted the congregation to follow me in that direction. I explained how I had chosen chalices made with precious metals to inhibit the growth of germs and how the people handling the bread and cup would take extra precautions to wash their hands. I gave them a clear sense not only of what we were doing, by why we were doing it and how it was going to be accomplished.

Did everyone immediately get on board? Of course not. But they felt heard and respected and valued. We carried on with the change, but in a way that honored the wisdom of the congregation and listened to their legitimate concerns.

So when it comes to leading congregational change, do yourself a favor: be able to articulate the *why* and the *how* just as clearly as you articulate the *what*.

4

Civility and humility are undoubtedly the most important characteristics for people to cling to when going through any kind of theologically charged conversation from _____ or _____ .

Unfortunately, I've seen many, on both sides, behave as if faithfulness is defined by theological rightness and holding the correct position. Without diminishing the importance of fidelity to Christ as revealed in the Bible and the lives of believers throughout history and today, faithfulness behaves less like theological self-righteousness and more like kindness and commitment to one another in Christian community.

In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch is a lawyer tasked to defend a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman in the racist south. Atticus is a righteous man, believing in the man's innocence. His willingness to defend the accused pits the whole town against Atticus. When his daughter is struggling with her own anger against the town people, Atticus tells her, "This time we aren't fighting the Yankees, we're fighting our friends. But remember this, no matter how bitter things get, they're still our friends and this is still our home."

We can hear the Spirit of Jesus alive and well in Atticus' words, and churches would do well to wear them like a mantra when walking through these difficult conversations.

Can we remain friends and in community with those we fiercely disagree? Absolutely, but it takes dependence on and commitment to the work of the Holy Spirit within us, which is no small task. Without sacrificing our own theological and ethical integrity, our ability to remain in civil relationship with one another is a measure of our faithfulness.

May God grant us the strength to endure and persevere.

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." John 17:20-23

5

Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, after decades of research identified five primary "moral foundations" from which we derive our religious convictions, morality, values, and ethics. These six foundations of moral reasoning are:

1. Care vs. Harm: Does this action hurt or help someone?

2. Fairness vs. Cheating: Does this action favor one person or party over another?

3. Loyalty vs. Betrayal: Does this action betray our shared group loyalty?

4. Authority vs. Subversion: Does this action break the chain of command in society?

5. Sanctity vs. Degradation: Does this action violate our cultural or religious purity codes?

In his research, Haidt discovered the first two foundations resonated with those on the left, the last three resonated with those on the right, and centrists seemed to embrace all five. These unspoken gut-reactions to violence, betrayal, or disgust, govern people's positions on everything from national politics to church conflicts to family dynamics. We are moved by our moral foundations.

This begs the question, are we emotional or reasonable in our beliefs? The research teaches us this: we are emotional creatures able to use our reason to justify almost any position. For our neighbors on the right, how can one be pro-life while supporting the death penalty and unrestricted access to assault weapons? Access to education, employment, and

healthcare for physical and mental needs are proven to reduce abortions and violence more than protesting and preaching.

For our neighbors on the left, how can one champion the cause of the poor while favoring trade agreements which embrace the reality of our globalizing economy but fail to invest capital and creativity in miners, farmers, and factory workers living outside of our urban bubbles? Because our lives are not touched by their stories and we are blinded by our own life experiences and pursuit of prosperity.

Underneath every issue, conflict, or position, is a human story. Like an iceberg whose frosty face floats above the ocean waves, if we look below the waters, we see a mountain supporting the icy molehill presenting itself to the world. If we dive deep enough to understand each other's stories, rather than chipping away at each other's faces, we might grasp the complexity and beauty of our neighbors and their beliefs. If we listen with respect and empathy, we might not change minds, but hopefully hearts.

6

When the church addresses difficult questions, we often take a "marketplace" approach. We either offer a theological position as a commodity to be bought and sold, or we push our sensibilities into the *marketplace of ideas* where they compete with other sentiments for acceptance. Among other problems with this approach, it assumes that congregants are like computer hard drives that receive data, store it, and adapt *in spite of* whatever histories they've undergone.

But if someone is predisposed to accept or reject a position, that's because they've been formed inside communities and histories (hence *pre*) that orient them toward particular visions of the good (hence *disposed*). These predispositions can't be undone by plugging in more information or by reading the right books, as important as those things may be. Rather, the development of our spiritual and intellectual lives occurs when we cultivate habits that point us toward a *different* vision of the good: the kingdom of God. This happens when our liturgies intentionally form our entire selves – mind, body, and spirit – in such a way that there's a new comportment to the world. The sociologist Peter Berger argues that these bodily rituals produce "plausibility structures" that determine whether certain claims are acceptable or not. In other words, they help us develop the capacity to say whether a claim such as "immigrants are not welcome" is consistent with the Christian *tradition*. Tradition is cultivated by embodied storytelling (liturgy), and embodied storytelling produces structures of plausibility. Or, as one philosopher once put it, the "know-how" of faith gives rise to the "know-what" of faith.

So, when churches wrestle with tough questions, it's important to remember that our liturgies frame the entire process. If, say, your church is dealing with _____ or _____, the emphases of your liturgy will have a bearing on the way the conversation plays out.

For example: James Forbes, the former pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, believes that *starting with the familiar* is a gesture of hospitality. In a liturgical setting, he once preached these words:

> Years ago, when I was still living in North Carolina, someone said to me, "Brother Forbes, do you think the gospel can be preached by someone who is not Pentecostal?" Well, I wasn't sure, for it was the only preaching I had known, but I imagined that it could happen even if I hadn't seen or heard it. Indeed, I found out some time later that it was so.
>
> Some time went by, and people began to press upon me the question of the ordination of women. "Could the gospel be preached by a woman even though the holy scriptures led a woman to keep silence in the church?"
>
> I had to ponder this, for it went against what I had known in my own church and there was much resistance from my brother clergy. But I listened to my sisters and before too long I knew the Spirit of God was calling them to preach. Who was I to get in God's way?

Do you notice how Dr. Forbes begins with the familiar? Some of his congregants were probably familiar and comfortable with Pentecostal-only preaching and male-only ministry and churches. But their pastor didn't whack them over the head with the alternatives. He *identified* with their sense of the familiar, which is a consummate act of hospitality. This gave his congregants time and space for their horizons to expand, and the form of his message – hospitality – helped produce a church ecosystem in which the exclusion of women was no longer plausible. Before they resolved the "know-what" of these difficult questions, they had to practice the "know-how" of the Christian faith. And that's true for all of us.

Documents from the Journey

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why is now the time to have this conversation and time of discernment?

We believe now is the right time for our church to have this conversation. We are not moving into this process haphazardly; rather, we sense God's call to be intentional and discerning with this topic. Church should be a place where we can be our true selves before God.

Second, this conversation is important as a way of responding to God's prophetic call in our culture and context. How is the Spirit at work in the midst of our congregation? In our culture? How is God leading us to witness to divine love in our contemporary world? If Jesus were here, what would you ask him right now?

Third, it is wise for us to be proactive rather than reactive in this matter. We should decide what our response will be. We don't want one situation to become the focal point of our decision-making process.

2. What is our responsibility as believers in interpreting Scripture?

As Christians, and specifically as Baptists, we hold certain beliefs that inform how we approach this conversation. Historically, Baptists have believed in the autonomy of the local church in matters of faith and theology. That means that no outside person or institution can dictate our beliefs and practices as a church.

As Baptists, we also believe that all Christians can and should read and interpret Scripture for themselves. Scripture, interpreted through the life and ministry of Jesus, is our

primary authority: we have no priest, prophet, or pope who serves as the ultimate authority to interpret it for us. This is a blessing, and a burden: each of us must listen with our hearts and our minds to how God is speaking to us through our sacred texts.

3. Isn't the Bible clear on _____ ?

Many of us experienced both challenge and growth related to _____ as we studied the Bible in our Fall 2015 series. During this and similar studies in the past, we found that we don't all interpret Scripture the same way. We read the same texts and came to different conclusions. Translational issues, matters of historical context, and our own cultural and interpretive lenses shape how we understand these texts. To the extent that we are all open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, this is okay. We can disagree on matters of theology and practice in many areas; our common identity in Christ, collective worship, and service in mission bind us together as a community.

Biblical texts are open to interpretation. One of our greatest strengths is our diversity, and we approach biblical texts in different ways. As we read these sacred texts, we must read them with humility, prayer, and an openness to the movement of God's Spirit. Finally, we acknowledge that all of us are "in process" in our understanding of God, Scripture, and _____. As we learn and study together, each of us continues to grow in our understanding.

Instructions for Small Group Facilitators

1) Thank the Host. Eat dessert and learn names in first 20-30-minute segment. Move into a circle seating arrangement and begin dialogue. Be sure to wrap up on time.

2) Review Ground Rules:

- We will develop a safe space for conversation where we listen carefully, respect all points of view, and trust one another with our stories.
- We will care for and protect one another by maintaining confidentiality for things shared in this room and in small group gatherings in homes.
- We will come with open minds to learn, grow together, and discern the movement of God's spirit among us.
    - We will be mindful of our assumptions
- We will refer questions about this process from non-church members to our Pastor

3) Inform folks that you are not taking specific notes, but you will take a general overview, with no specific names mentioned, to the Dialogue Leadership Team.

4) IMPORTANT! Let folks know that you are going to hand out another important hyperlink to a church survey. We need everyone to complete the anonymous survey as it will provide important information for our Community Conversation on Nov. 13 (5-6:30 in the Fellowship Hall).

5) Please end the evening in prayer and then ask folks to help the host clean-up if they have time to do so.

6) Lastly, facilitators are asked to take 10-15 minutes, at home, and send us an overview of the evening (2-4 paragraphs). What were the major threads in the conversation? What was the dominant tone of the evening? What questions surfaced that the deacons need to consider? Do we need to follow-up with anyone for purposes of pastoral care? Please e-mail your overview to _____

Dialogue Questions:

Dessert & Dialogue: Session 1

1. How do you feel about our church having this conversation? Why do you think it's important for our congregation to go through this discernment process?
2. What life experiences, relationships, scripture, etc. have shaped how you approach this decision-making process?
3. What are you hopeful about as our church engages in this conversation and discernment process together?
4. What are you afraid of as our church engages in this conversation and discernment process together? Any specific outcomes you are afraid of? Anything in the process you are afraid of?
5. What response do you have as a result of listening to last Sunday's speakers share their stories?
6. What do you most relate to in the stories we've shared around the circle tonight?
7. What do you least relate to in the stories we've shared around the circle tonight?
8. If Jesus were here, what would you ask him right now?

First Draft of Consensus Statement

Dear Deacons:

I hope this letter finds you well. The 2016 Diaconate asked a Deacon subgroup to begin working on an initial draft of the consensus statement, in hopes that it would aid our conversation at our January 7 meeting. The Deacons will meet this Saturday, 9:00 - noonish, in the fellowship hall. We are indebted to those of you who worked over Advent/Christmas on the first draft.

The sub-group recommends that we craft something that focuses on our common purpose. The actual consensus statement (draft is bolded below) fits into a larger picture of what it means for us to be church. We will share more thoughts with everyone when we meet but wanted you to read through this initial draft before you arrive. Please bring prayerful thoughts, suggestions, etc. Please avoid sharing the draft with anyone outside of the Deacon Board. We will share draft #2 with the church-at-large at the Community Conversation.

Lastly, please make plans to also join this Sunday's Community Conversation, January 8th, 5-6:30 p.m. We will share the second draft, created the previous day, and ask for feedback/questions from the congregation. You are gifted leaders and we're grateful for your guidance.

Grace and Peace,

_____, Pastor

DRAFT OF OUR STATEMENT

God is at work among us. Like the Christ followers of previous generations, we are recipients of God's extravagant hospitality. We are invited in God's grace to serve the Lord with

our all and to love our neighbors. Together, as _____ Baptist Church, we seek to understand God's call on our lives personally and collectively through Scripture, God's Spirit, the example and teaching of Jesus Christ, and our experience as a community of Christ followers. Through our callings we strive for deliberate engagement in mission, discipleship, worship, and fellowship. Hearing and responding to God's call has led us to an increasingly diverse church family. In 2016, we began a season of deliberate study and discernment about our call to love God and neighbor, specifically regarding how and to what extent we will _____.

During this season, we have sought discernment through prayer, large and small group conversation, and Bible study. It is no surprise that our diversity of gender, ethnicity, age, church tradition, scriptural understanding, income, and political leaning would also come with diversity of conviction and thought about how we engage and understand our differences. Amid the tension and beauty of our diversity we have found room to agree and disagree, to ask questions and hear responses, to be vulnerable with one another, to move into and away from the dialogue as needed, all with grace and respect for our needs and the needs of our neighbors. We have also discovered a unanimous desire to serve God, wanting to love others as Christ has loved us. On the other side of this process we are still a diverse community, but we are bravely walking toward a consensus of how we will function and provide care for the diversity that is us.

Moving forward, we will continue to embody the kind of welcome and hospitality we have received in Christ, calling and equipping all persons together. We will continue to respond

to God's invitation through our core values of mission, discipleship, worship, and fellowship. We will do this together, seeking to honor our diversity, our neighbors, and our God.

Second Draft of Consensus Statement

After Deacon Meeting for Community Conversation #3 January 2017 copy DRAFT OF STATEMENT:

God is at work among us. Like Christ followers of previous generations, we are recipients of God's extravagant hospitality. We are invited in God's grace to serve the Lord and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Together, as _____ Baptist Church, we seek to understand God's call on our lives personally and collectively through Scripture, God's Spirit, the example and teaching of Jesus Christ, and our experience as a community of Christ followers. Through our callings we strive for deliberate engagement in mission, discipleship, worship, and fellowship. Hearing and responding to God's call has led us to an increasingly diverse church family.

It is no surprise that our diversity of age, gender, ethnicity, church tradition, scriptural understanding, income, and political leaning would also come with diversity of conviction and thought about how we engage and understand our differences. We seek discernment through prayer, large and small group conversation, and Bible study. Amid the tension and beauty of our diversity we have found room to agree and disagree, to ask questions and hear responses, to be vulnerable with one another, to move into and away from dialogue as needed, all with grace and respect for our needs and the needs of our neighbors. We have also discovered a

unanimous desire to serve God, wanting to love others as Christ has loved us and to bravely walk toward how we function and care for the diversity that is us.

Our experience with Christ reveals a Savior who is calling and equipping all of us to share in the Kingdom of God. We strive to embody and uphold that invitation to all of God's children represented in our midst. We will continue to embody the welcome and hospitality we have received in Christ, calling and equipping all persons together. We will continue to respond to God's invitation through our core values of mission, discipleship, worship, and fellowship. We will continue prayerfully to do this together, seeking to honor our diversity, our neighbors, and our God.

Third Draft of Consensus Statement

Like Christ followers of previous generations, we are recipients of God's extravagant hospitality. Together, as _____ Baptist Church, we seek to understand God's call on our lives personally and collectively through Scripture, the Holy Spirit, the example and teaching of Jesus Christ, and our experience as a community of Christ-followers. Through our callings we strive for deliberate engagement in mission, discipleship, worship, and fellowship. Hearing and responding to God's call has led us to an increasingly diverse church family.

It is no surprise that our diversity of age, gender, ethnicity, ability, church tradition, scriptural understanding, income, and political leaning would also come with diversity of conviction and thought about how we engage and understand our differences. We seek discernment through prayer, large and small group conversation, and Bible study. Amid the tension and beauty of our diversity we have found room to agree and disagree, to ask questions and hear responses, to be vulnerable with one another, to move into and away from dialogue as needed, all with grace and respect for our needs and the needs of our neighbors. We affirm a unanimous desire to serve God, wanting to love others as Christ has loved us and to bravely walk toward how we function and care for the diversity that is us.

Our experience with Christ reveals a Savior who is calling and equipping all of us to share in the Kingdom of God. Through hospitality, worship, prayer, Bible study, and discernment, we partner with all Christ followers in their calling. We strive to embody and uphold that invitation to all of God’s children represented in our midst.

We will continue to embody the welcome and hospitality we have received in Christ, calling and equipping all persons together. We will continue to respond to God's invitation

through our core values of mission, discipleship, worship, and fellowship. We will continue to do this together prayerfully, seeking to honor our diversity, our neighbors, and our God.

Discernment Tool

Bulletin Insert

TODAY IS DEADLINE TO TURN IN DISCERNMENT EXERCISE

REGARDING OUR

STATEMENT OF WELCOME AND DISCERNMENT

Today marks a significant moment in the consensus process as we have reached the deadline to turn in the discernment exercise form. Thus, please be sure to turn in your form before you leave the building today.

1. Please carefully read through the statement and pray about your response.

2. Turn the sheet over and read through the 5 listed options.

3. Draw a stick figure, inside the circle, in the location that best exhibits your current feelings about the statement. Perhaps you find yourself agreeing with one of the options completely or even find yourself between two of the listed options?

4. You may choose to write a comment next to your stick figure. It will be shared with the congregation at our next Community Conversation. You may choose to write your name next to your optional comment or leave it anonymous.

5. Place your completed Discernment Exercise Form in the assigned box in the back of the Sanctuary or give it to a member of the staff. Today is the deadline.

The Deacons will review the results of the exercise and determine if we have a consensus. The results will be shared at next Sunday's Community Conversation, directly after worship

Statement of Welcome and Discernment

Like Chr llowers of previous generations, we are recipients of God's extravagant hospitality. With open arms, Christ welcomes all. Together, as Tabernac ptist Church, we seek to understand God's call on our lives personally and collectively through Scripture, the leading of the Holy Spirit, th mple and teaching of Jesus Christ, and our experience as a community of Christ-followers. Through our callings, we strive for deliberat agement in our core values of mission, discipleship, worship, and fellowship. Hearing and responding to God's call, we are becoming an increa y diverse church family.

Our expe e with Christ reveals a Savior who is calling and equipping all to share in the Kingdom of God. We commit to embody and uphold that invitatior persons of every age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic situation, intellectual or physical capability, gender-identity, and sexual orientatic resented in our midst. Through hospitality, worship, prayer, Bible study, large and small group conversation, and discernment, we partner w l Christ-followers as our lives intertwine with one another, from birth to death and in between, especially in our :

- ng,
- ch membership,
- ism,
- iage,
- nation to deacon service and vocational ministry, and
- ion.

Amid the ty and tension of our diversity, we find room to agree and disagree, to ask questions and hear responses, to be vulnerable with one another, t ve into and away from dialogue as needed, all with grace and respect for our needs and the needs of our neighbors. Above all, we affirm a u mous desire to serve God and to love others as Christ has loved us.

***Please v a anywhere along the inside of the circle as it relates to your feelings on the Statement of Welcome and Discernm You may choose to write a comment beside your drawing. We request that each family use discernment about children uth participating in this exercise. Also, please only turn in one survey per person. The deadline to turn in this discernm xercise form is February 19; the collection box is located in the back of the church sanctuary. We will share results, and your ments, at our Community Conversation on Feb. 26.*

THE TABERNACLE BAPTIST CHURCH

February 8, 2017

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