

From Dissonance to Resonance in Congregational Culture: Insights and Questions to Consider

By Dr. W. Craig Gilliam

After 25+ years of working with congregations in conflict from various faith traditions and teaching in the field, the following are some questions and insights I find helpful when assisting congregations in finding their way from conflict, dissonance, and chaos to resonant, resilient ministry. Along with Gilliam and Associates, LLC, (www.gilliamandassociates.com), I recently became a collaborative partner with the Wi2Co-Lab Team (<https://www.wi2colab.com/>).

This article offers insights and questions discovered in walking with congregations from conflict or dissonance to resonance and becoming a more creative, adaptive, resilient community. To take a congregation on this journey, leadership skills, competencies, and techniques are vital; however, the leader's way of being and self-awareness, or emotional intelligence, is paramount.

An attentive process of assessment is essential for growth and success in walking with congregations caught in anxiety, dissonance, and conflict. Situational assessments involve open conversations, safe space, honest questions, deep, mindful listening, careful observations, I-Thou way of being (Kauffman, 1970), fairness, capacity to hold in-between space, and an attitude of curiosity and compassion. A toleration for messiness and openness to surprise are perspectives I promote in this work. A guiding principle I use during times of conflict is, "Be open to God, whose middle name is Surprise!" (Gilliam, 2013), who usually shows up in the most unusual places, faces, and spaces.

Seven insights that I have learned as a consultant working with congregations in conflict:

1. *No two congregations nor their conflicts are precisely alike, so the conflict processes must be designed based on the specific situation, culture, desired outcomes, vision, and values. Though congregations might have similarities, each has particular distinctives; thus, there are no cookie-cutter approaches. Each design is unique to the given congregation.*
2. *As a consultant and leader, stay calm, non-anxious, and in an I-Thou way (Kauffman, 2017). Such a way of being has a salutary effect on others in the process. Change begins with ourselves.*
3. *Speak less, listen more.* The best consultants *rarely try to put in what is left out* of a congregation or leader; instead, the consultant *draws out what is left in* to help the congregation maximize its strengths, best choices, and paths forward.
4. *Enjoy the playground of complexity, curiosity, creativity, and learning.* In the complex social realities of congregational conflict, John Paul Lederach suggests holding "paradoxical curiosity" (2005, p.36). Paradoxical curiosity involves the art of avoiding simplistic, dualistic categories of truth. Settling for overly simplistic views or polarities on complex issues is the forbidden fruit that shuts down conversations, stifles authentic connections, interferes with understanding, and blocks creative paths forward. Instead, suspend judgment in favor of holding and exploring contradictions and paradoxes.
5. *Cultivate the agility to adapt, pivot, and recalculate.* As surprises arise, have the lightness of feet to adapt in the moment.

6. *As a consultant and leader, maintain clear, appropriate boundaries and stay in connection.* When anxiety and conflict intensify, boundaries are often compromised and blurred in congregations. Modeling appropriate boundaries while staying in connection helps the congregation understand, re-establish, and clarify their own boundaries while staying in relationship.
7. *The consultant and leader's roles are to help the community discern its purpose, who it is at its best, and help it cultivate its strengths while managing weaknesses.* The discerning questions are what beckons the congregation? "What gives meaning and life in its passionate pursuit" (Gilliam, 2021, p. 2)? The congregation's response to these questions, aligned with resources, talents, and strengths, point toward their path to meaningful, resonant (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005) ministry.

Questions for leaders to consider when assessing a congregation in conflict:

1. Who are the parties involved?
2. How do they describe the conflict?
3. What is the level of conflict?
4. What cultural issues are at play?
5. How vast is the divide or chasm?
6. What are the power relationships between groups and individuals?
7. Where are the interconnections in the congregation?
8. How much time and energy are leaders willing to give to working through the conflict?
9. What are the costs of this conflict for the congregation (emotionally, physically, spiritually, financially, etc.)?
10. How willing is the congregation to work through the conflict honestly and respectfully?
11. Does the leader have any prior connections with those in the congregation that might interfere or compromise the work? Could the relationship or issues tap into any unfair or unconscious bias of the leader?

Conflict is inevitable and part of what it means to be alive and to live in community. Accurately assessing and responding to situations fraught with anxiety and conflict is vital for growing effective ministry and strengthening the congregation's efficacy. Conflict is not the challenge; instead, how people respond to it determines whether it is helpful or harmful. Out of chaos comes clarity, growth, and the possibilities for a new future. What are the invitations and opportunities trying to emerge? What future is God calling them to create?

You can't be who you are not, but you can be more of who you are. That is true for individuals, groups, and congregations. To put this in theological language, "Self-realization, correctly understood, is God's incarnation" (Gilliam, 2021, p. 76).

If I or we can be of assistance to you in any way, please let me know. Stay safe and be well!

Agree or disagree, you are invited into the conversation!

References

Boyatzis, R. & McKee, A. (2005). *Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others Through Mindfulness, Hope, and Compassion*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press,

Gilliam, W. C. (2021). *What Beckons You? Poems*. Salt Lake City, UT: Vervante Press.

Gilliam, W. C. (2013). *Where Angels Dare to Dance: Anxiety and Conflict in Congregational Life A Systems Perspective*. 2nd ed. JustPeace Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation, Washington, D. C.

Kauffman, W. (1970). *I and Thou: Martin Buber*. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Lederach, J. P. (2005). *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

**Note—This article is not a definitive statement; my (and colleagues) understanding constantly evolves out of experience, new learning, and research.*