**UPDATE –July 27, 2020**

August will start the sixth month of dealing with the coronavirus and the effects it has had on everyday affairs. The past two months have seen dramatic increases on the number of positive tests. Work continues on vaccines and other treatments for COVID-19. Some vaccines are in early trials to determine effectiveness and safety, but it will still be some time before a successful vaccine is ready. In the meantime, we must continue to respond to the virus as we have been encouraged to do so over the past five months, including responsible attention to social distancing, wearing masks, and following proper sanitizing protocols.

This is occurring in the midst of a summer where issues of racial injustice have happened, and peaceful protests and civil unrest continues in a number of locations. Combined with grief of lost friends and loved ones and ongoing uncertainties about jobs, finances, and the other concerns of life, it all contributes to many people being more stressed than usual.

I have seen this being borne out in some of our congregations where there are concerns and disagreements arising over various issues, including whether to reopen for in-person worship, the wearing of masks, pastoral care concerns, the amount of hours being worked by church staff from remote locations, and other issues.

Disagreements over church issues is nothing new within the Presbyterian Church. I sometimes say the first Presbyterian disagreement in America occurred shortly after the second Presbyterian stepped off the boat from Europe. An analysis of statements made by the Presbyterian Church in the 1700’s – before there was a General Assembly – reveals this.

In the 1730’s, in the midst of the first Great Awakening, there was increasing disagreement over the issues such as standards for the preparation of ministers and appropriate forms of worship. Part of the conflict involved ministers being prepared at the “Log College” in Princeton, New Jersey to meet the increasing demand for pastoral leadership in the growing church. The church divided in the late 1730’s into the Old Light and New Light sides over these issues. This split was not healed until 1758, when the denomination adopted a statement that still appears in the *Book of Order* today as a footnote to G-2.0105:

That when any matter is determined by a major vote, every member shall either actively concur with or passively submit to such determination; or if his conscience permit him to do neither, he shall, after sufficient liberty modestly to reason and remonstrate, peaceably withdraw from our communion without attempting to make any schism.

Thirty years later, at the time that the General Assembly was organized, the Presbyterian Church adopted a statement called the Historic Principles of Church Order. These principles still appear in the *Book of Order* as F-3.01, and include the following statement:

,,, we also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which [persons] of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other. (F-3.0105)

I have always believed that these statements exist because we were doing a lot of disagreeing in those days..

When conflict occurs within the church, we sometimes think something is wrong. We are Christians called to unity in Jesus Christ, and we should not be having disagreements. But as I have been trying to illustrate above, disagreements have always been part of the life of the church. Peter and Paul had a sharp disagreement over the full acceptance of Gentile believers in the church (Galatians 2:11-14). Paul and Barnabas disagreed over whether to take John Mark on the next planned mission trip, which caused them to part ways (Acts 15:36-41). Disagreements arose and were prayerfully addressed and the work of the church moved forward. Sometimes it is our differences which provide the needed energy to move the church forward into our next chapter.

I had a religion professor in college that sometimes brought our arguments over various issues into perspective by saying there are times when we need to agree to disagree, just not be disagreeable as we do so. When we are faced with “truths and forms” in which we differ, we need to remember the call of our faith and polity to “exercise mutual forbearance.” And given the moment in which we are living, we need to assess to what level our circumstances may be coloring our perceptions of the concerns at hand.

That being said, a few thoughts about responding to conflicts when they arise:

1. The resource “[Seeking to Be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/peacemaking/pdf/guidelines.pdf)” is a helpful tool for managing conflict, particularly its reminder that we focus on principles, not personalities.
2. James, no stranger to disagreements in the church, reminds us to “be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for [our] anger does not produce God's righteousness.” (James 1:19-20 (NRSV)).
3. Take a step back and try to imagine you are ten years in the future, looking back on the current issue. Will you feel good about your involvement in it? What can you do now to make sure you will?
4. Talk to the right people about your concern. In most church disagreements, this is the Session, the ones elected to oversee the affairs of the congregation. Try not to talk in circles around the edges of the congregation. Bring your concerns to the elders, and remember the commitments made when your leaders were installed: “Do we agree to pray for them, to encourage them, to respect their decisions, and to follow as they guide us, serving Jesus Christ, who alone is Head of the Church?” (W-4.0404)

It is inevitable that disagreements will arise within a congregation, in part because we are all different people with different experiences. If there are 200 members within a congregation, it is likely there are at least 201 different opinions of the direction in which the congregation should head. When we encounter those differences, may we remember that our part in them will reveal how much we have understood the call of Jesus Christ in our lives, as Paul indicates; “In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it.

No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval” (1 Corinthians 11:18-19 (NIV)).

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