

Peace, Peace! But there is No Peace: Certainly Not in a Majority of Congregations¹

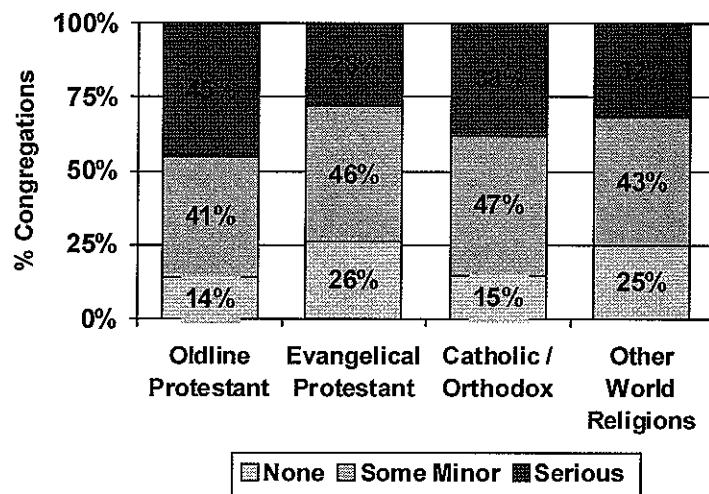
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I strongly suspect that readers of this magazine want to believe, as I do, that our religion is an agent of hope, peace and reconciliation. Religion's prominence in national and international politics and the sexual politics invasive of so many of our nation's national denominational meetings notwithstanding, we do want to believe this. In comparison to the cost in time, resources and anguish of such contestations, a little fight in the local church down the block may hardly seem consequential (other than to those immediately involved, who wouldn't be a party to the conflict if they didn't care deeply). Regrettably, it is not just the church down the street. Indeed, the Faith Communities Today (FACT) series of national surveys of U.S. congregations has consistently found that nearly eight of every ten congregations have experienced conflict within five years of the date of the survey. Using a best guestimate of 350,000 congregations in the U.S., 80% translates to 280,000 congregations working through some form of contested difference in any given five year period. How can our faith be a vehicle for peace in the world if there is no peace in its local home?

Fortunately, not all of this conflict is serious enough to result in such tangibly visible consequences as members or leaders leaving or members withholding funding. But as shown in Figure 1 from the FACT2008 survey, such serious conflict is present in a third of congregations overall and reaches a high of 45% for Oldline Protestant congregations [see *American Congregations 2008* for details about the survey: <http://fact.hartsem.edu/>].

The most frequent response to serious conflict regardless of the kind of conflict is that of members leaving, but especially when the conflict involves leadership issues or worship. Withholding contributions is not as prevalent a response as one might imagine, and a leader leaving is rare except, as one would expect, in conflicts about leadership. FACT2008 also found, consistent with the findings first reported in FACT2005, that within the general patterns just noted, member mobility appears to be a preferred "Evangelical Protestant" response, rotating leadership a

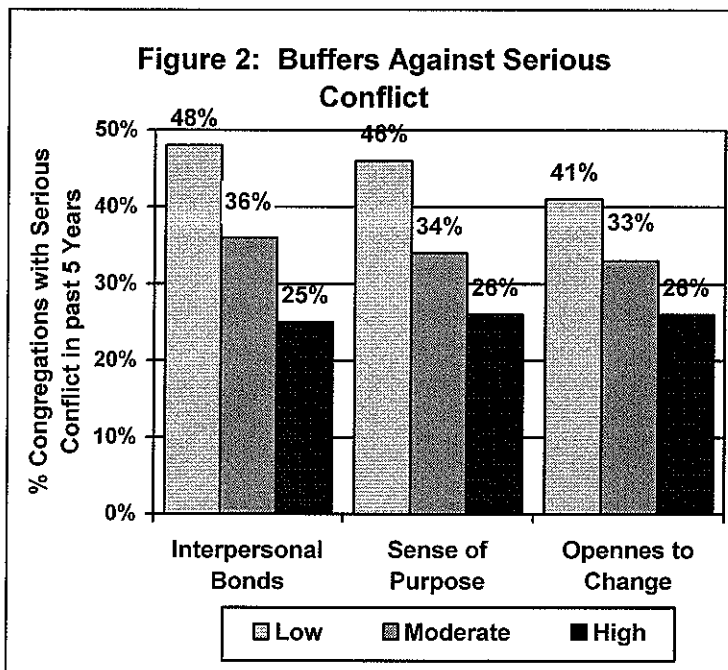
Figure 1: Conflict in the Past Five Years



¹ Another version of this article appeared in *The Progressive Christian: Faith and the Common Good*, Vol 184, Issue 1, 2010.

preferred Catholic/Orthodox response, and withholding money a preferred Oldline Protestant response.

These are not, of course, the only corrosive effects of conflict. For virtually every measure of congregational vitality contained in the FACT surveys, conflict erodes vitality and the more severe the conflict the greater the affect – whether for spiritual vitality, financial health, numerical growth, or the securing, nurturing and caring for lay leadership. In the FACT2008 survey, for example, two-thirds of congregations with no conflict in the past five years reported that their fiscal health was good or excellent. For congregations that reported serious conflicts, less than one-third responded that their fiscal health was good or excellent. It strikes me as more than a bit ironic that theological education requires certification in pastoral counseling, but absolutely no training in conflict management.



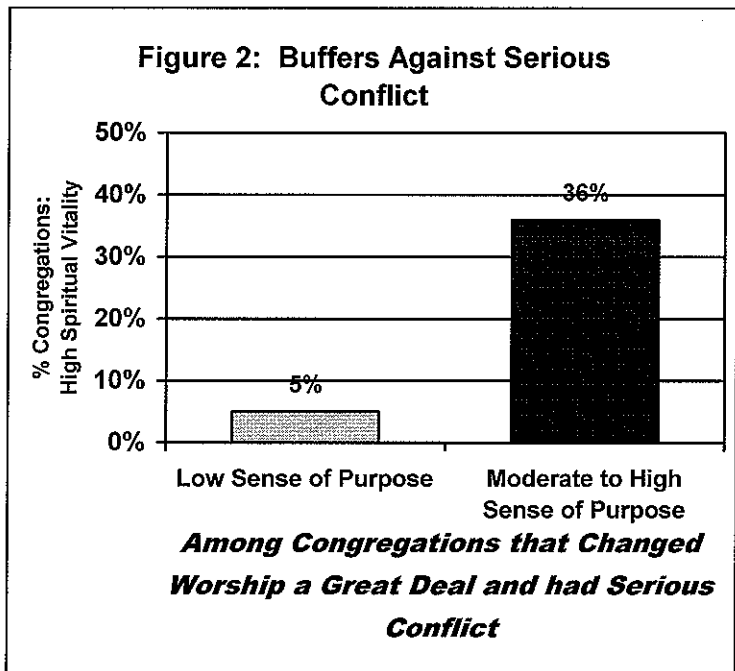
There is some positive news, however. There are things a congregation can do, preventively, to decrease the likelihood of conflict and its severity. Creating strong interpersonal bonds, clarity of mission and purpose, and building a congregational cultural open to change are three of these whose effect is readily apparent in FACT2008. As shown in Figure 2, the prevalence of serious conflict decreases as the prevalence of these characteristics increase. The focus on “serious conflict,” adds an important nuance to the “preventative” analogy. It is not so much that such characteristics prevent conflicts. Rather, it seems that such things as strong interpersonal bonds, clarity about purpose, and openness to change help

congregations manage inevitable conflicts and keep them from becoming serious.

There are lots of reasons at a lot of different levels for the pervasiveness of conflict in our faith communities today. We live in a time of great social and global unsettledness and change, for example, and we know as a fact that the vitality of our religious organizations is dependent, in many respects, upon adaptive responses to this change. We also know that the change of otherwise adaptive responses raises the level of conflict. Yes, change in our religious habits typically comes only with the cost of having to work through conflict. From this perspective, conflict generates necessary energy which is not necessarily good or bad. The trick is to harness the energy for positive change.

Contemporary worship presents an archetypical, and immediately relevant, example of the change – conflict – vitality nexus. One hopefully doesn’t need survey data to convince congregation watchers that the prevalence of contemporary worship has increased dramatically

over the last decade or so – it has, and according to the FACT series of surveys the rate of change to contemporary forms of worship continues to accelerate within Oldline Protestantism! The notion that congregations that have a contemporary approach to worship also have higher levels of vitality is a bit harder to swallow for some. Trust me (or any nationally representative study of congregations done in the last 10 years that deals with the subject), they do – across the full spectrum of possible measures of vitality including spiritual, numerical, financial, and missional. But here’s the rub. The survey data also show that congregations that have changed their worship style are more likely than those that haven’t changed their worship to experience conflict, and the greater the change the greater the conflict. **Bottom line: changing worship is a risk.** On the one hand, if you can’t work through the conflict, any vitality bounce is likely a long-term hope. If you can manage the conflict, there’s a good chance the change will pay off. Indeed, the interplay of worship change, conflict and the “preventative” factors noted above present one



of the most dramatic findings in the FACT2008 survey. As shown in Figure 3, among congregations that changed worship a great deal and had serious conflict, only five percent that had a low sense of purpose expressed high spiritual vitality, but this jumps to 35% for those congregations with a moderate to high sense of purpose.

Change can be reconciled with peace. But it takes common purpose, and in a world of difference common purpose is a rare gift.