

From Surgery to Acupuncture

An Alternative Approach to Managing Church Conflict from An Asian American Perspective

by Virstan B. Y Choy
published in *Conflict Management in Congregations*
Alban Institute 2001

With responses by David Augsberger, Alice Mann and Margaret Bruehl.

Wanting to explore the theme “Improving Harmony and Communication in the Church,” an Asian American congregation invites a white counsellor to be the keynote speaker for its annual all-members’ retreat. The speaker focuses one of the sessions on intergenerational communication.

To encourage openness in sharing, the speaker asks the youth present to identify issues about which they and their parents disagree. No youth responds. The speaker rearranges her audience, asking the adults to sit on one side of the room and the youth to sit on the other. She then rephrases the question to the youth, “Think about the last time you and your parents had an argument. What was it about?” Still no youth responds.

One of the adults new to the congregation tries to help. “Maybe the youth need more time to think up some things to say. Maybe they need anonymity. How about if we break up into two groups, one for the youth, one for the adults, for the next half-hour so that each generation can come up with a list of what bugs them about the other generation. Each group could choose its own reporter so that we won’t know who actually made the complaint in the first place.” The retreat leader agrees with the suggestion. The members divide into the two groups and meet.

Thirty minutes later, the groups return to the plenary room. The youth are given the opportunity to report first. Their designated reporter reads from a small piece of paper, “As the youth generation of this church, we appreciate the opportunity to share our opinions at this retreat. However, what our parents and we disagree about—well, we don’t feel it’s right to bring that up in public. We love our parents. What we argue about is between us.” She looks to the other youth. They nod in agreement. She turns back to the audience, says “Thank you,” and returns to her seat.

A CASE STORY ON FACING CONFLICT IN A PUBLIC MEETING.

In an Asian American congregation, a lay leader is aware of a conflict among some of the members and is unsure about how to respond. She consults a member of her denomination’s regional staff, who offers to visit the church and to engage the members in some conflict resolution exercises. In his visit with the congregation, the denominational executive emphasises “openness in communication” and encourages members to come forward so that, “face-to-face,” they might “openly confront” their problems. He asks the members to devote the day-long open meeting to the practice of conflict resolution techniques “effective in other churches that have experienced conflict.”

The church members dutifully cooperate with their executive, participating in activities engaging them in presenting their “side” of the issue, answering his questions about background history, and in trying exercises in open communication.

At the end of this process, he presents to the congregation his “findings,” his analysis of the conflict based upon these findings, and his recommendations for what the congregation needs to do. One of the findings is the revelation that there is more than one conflict in the congregation, that some members reported disagreements with other members that have existed for over two decades—disagreements “allowed” to remain unresolved.

Included in this report is his “power analysis” of the congregation, revealing his perceptions of how power and authority have been skewed in favor of the older generations of the church for over two decades and how dysfunctional it would be for the congregation not to change such a situation. The executive then lists the changes that need to be made in order for the members to resolve their conflicts and to move forward together. He concludes his report by noting the positive results of confronting conflict and the importance of continuing such a “face-to-face” process. He thanks the congrega-

tion for its cooperation. The members thank the executive for his time and efforts and close with prayers for him and the church.

The day after this meeting, citing the statements about one another made in public the day before, many of the members announce their decision to leave the congregation.

FROM A HUMAN RELATIONS MODEL TO A PRESERVING RELATIONSHIPS UNDERSTANDING

Most current approaches to church conflict management are based upon conceptions of congregations as organisations (and congregational leadership as organisational leadership). These conceptions have been primarily shaped by human relations theory. The preceding stories of two actual cases in Asian American congregations show how such approaches are influenced by a psychological understanding of relationships within congregations, which encourages confrontation of disagreements, engages the persons involved in a conflict in direct interaction, and emphasises communication skills (self-disclosure, assertiveness in expressing demands, negotiation, compromise, and collaboration). The use of such approaches to conflict in Asian American congregations has not been effective.

To understand why, it is helpful to refer to Asian and Asian American researchers (several are listed in the “Selected Resources” section at the end of this article) who remind us that, for Asians, society is not individual based, but relationship-based. This focus upon relationships is rooted in Confucianism, in which human beings are expected to develop and conduct themselves as “relation-oriented” individuals. Accordingly, attitudes that enable and sustain this relational orientation are cultivated in the Asian family and Asian community. Three such attitudes or relational postures are:

- continuous awareness of one’s networks of relationships
- recognition of the importance of “face” (public self-image) for those with whom one is in relationship
- fulfilment of the obligations involved in maintaining one’s relationships.

These attitudes and postures continue to shape behaviour, not just for the immigrant Asian generation as it arrives in this country, but for the American-born generations as well—even to the third and fourth generations.

They are predispositional in nature—so influential that they are perceived by some Asian Americans as a sort of “cultural DNA”—not always consciously

present, but functionally operative in predisposing Asian Americans to a distinctive posture for engaging in interpersonal interactions in the family, in the community, and in the congregation.

At first look, approaches to congregational conflict emphasising human relations theory and process might seem consistent with and appropriate to the relational orientation of people belonging to Asian American congregations. Yet, from the perspective of many Asian Americans, the confrontational processes and techniques used in human relations approaches actually violate the cultural values and norms regarding relationship, face, and obligation at the root of their understanding of human relationships. For many Asian Americans, behaviour is based not primarily upon one’s own feelings, interests, and motivations (as emphasised in the majority American society), but rather upon those of the persons with whom one has relationship. A cultural collision occurs when persons acting out of this posture are placed in conflict management situations emphasising attention to one’s own feelings and calling for expression (and negotiation) of one’s own needs and interests.

Sensitivity to the following key factors may lead to more effective response to conflict in Asian American congregations:

- the power of the relational orientation
- the predisposition toward preserving relationship
- the preference for non-confrontational interaction
- the paradox of solidarity in the midst of conflict

1. The Power of the Relational Orientation

Relationship (rather than individual needs or interests) is at the center of the Asian American orientation to conflict. As reflected in the first case story, this relational orientation influences interpersonal behavior in conflict or potential conflict situations. Understanding this orientation is therefore foundational to the development of any culturally relevant conflict management approaches for Asian Americans.

2. The Predisposition toward Preserving Relationship

In situations of conflict, the relational orientation leads to a predisposition toward preserving relationship with those with whom one is involved in a disagreement. Con-

sequently, as reflected in the second case story, differences and even disagreements may be allowed to remain unresolved over a long period of time in order to preserve the face of others (“save face”) and therefore maintain some form of relationship (“save relationship”). In such situations, what non-Asian American conflict managers may perceive as passivity or inability to make decisions may actually be an intentional, culturally shaped decision not to engage in interactions that threaten face or confrontations which jeopardise relationships.

3. The Preference for Non-confrontational Interaction

In face-to-face interactions between Person A and Person B, there are four possible outcomes: A might lose face, B might lose face, both A and B might lose face, neither A nor B might lose face. Since three of the four possibilities result in loss of face, the odds do not favour a face-saving outcome in most processes calling for face-to-face interactions! Consequently, the predisposition toward preserving relationships leads to the preference for non-confrontational interaction. This is not a preference for inactivity, but for active non-confrontation in conflict interactions with one another. Such non-confrontation takes the form of subtle or indirect engagement of parties in disagreement, for instance, through trusted third-party “go-betweens” who serve as avenues for indirect communication (rather than professional mediators who engage disputants in direct communication).

4. The Paradox of Solidarity in the Midst of Conflict

The predisposition toward preserving relationships enables the toleration of ambiguity in these relationships in times of disagreement. Some Asian American congregations have remained together in the midst of their differences, deferring debate or other open efforts designed to resolve the dispute. Some Asian Americans have characterised such congregational cohesion in the face of conflict as “solidarity in conflict” in contrast to the “unity in diversity” emphasised in some mainline denominations. This difference has theological implications: How might a theology of solidarity be different from a theology of unity or a theology of reconciliation in shaping our conflict ministry?

FROM SURGERY TO ACUPUNCTURE

Assessing problems in interpersonal and intergroup relationships, many Asian Americans are inclined to adopt a posture of subtlety, indirectness, and non-confrontational interaction. They are not inclined to adopt most current approaches to church conflict management, which involve direct, face-to-face interactions, personal disclosures in public settings, as well as provision of private personal information to outsiders or strangers. Like surgery, these approaches involve cutting the body open, exposing for examination (and therefore exposing to risk) delicate parts of the body, and sometimes even cutting and removal of parts of the body. Like surgery, such techniques are invasive. Like surgery, they risk causing trauma to the body. Like surgery, they sometimes cause the death of the body.

In contrast, acupuncture is less invasive, less incising, and less risky. Rather than pre-surgery X-rays, probes, or the introduction of other foreign chemicals or instruments into the body, it involves non-invasive external observation of key points of the body. Rather than involving surgical incisions, this approach calls only for the gentle insertion of small needles. Rather than identifying, examining, chemically treating and/or cutting out parts of the body, acupuncture seeks to keep body parts in healthy relation to one another, working to free the flow of energy within the body and between its parts. For many Asian Americans, acupuncture is an attractive metaphor suggesting new ways of intervening in church conflicts.

Given its emphasis upon maintaining balance in the body and enabling the free flow of energy within the body, the acupuncture metaphor provides an opportunity for re-conceiving intervention, mediation, and the use of third-party consultants in conflict situations. Consultants need a posture less like that of an “outside expert” in objective process and more like an intermediary—not necessarily mediator or nor arbitrator, but more a “go-between” who provides an avenue for subtle and indirect contact between people in conflict. A “shadow consultant” who works informally in the background rather than directly and visibly may provide the sort of non-invasive intervention suggested by the acupuncture image.

SOME QUESTIONS FOR RESPONDING TO ASIAN AMERICAN CONFLICT

For people seeking to utilise the observations and proposals in this essay, the following questions may be of help. They are offered, not as a new protocol to be followed for an Asian American conflict, but as questions to be asked in an acupuncture posture or spirit by those working with Asian American congregations.

Assessment of a Conflict Situation

1. In what ways is ethnicity a factor in this congregation? How has such ethnicity been a factor during times of previous conflict?
2. In what ways are the four key factors and dynamics affecting Asian American conflict present and operative in this congregation?
3. How does the culture of the congregation's members provide ways for people in conflict to manage or resolve their differences? Which of those ways are operative in this congregation?
4. To what extent does the congregation already use third parties or "go-betweens" in interpersonal interactions, decision making, conflict? How have they been helpful in the past in this congregation?

Developing a Response to a Conflict Situation

5. In a conflict situation, what might constitute an "acupuncture-like" approach to responding?
6. Given the "energy flow" image in the acupuncture metaphor, how is the energy flow of the congregation at this point? What keeps it flowing? Is there any blockage? What is needed to "unblock" the energy flow?
7. If "go-betweens" are used, are any "available" (willing) to assist in enabling non-confrontational communication and interaction between the parties in the conflict?
8. How might a shadow consultant be acceptable and used in this conflict?

CONCLUSION

The five key factors in Asian American conflict and the proposal for an acupuncture-like approach presented here represent initial discoveries on the path to a culturally sensitive approach to conflict management in Asian American congregations. Such a proposal does not represent a dismissal of existing approaches by church consultants and denominational executives.

It does represent an alert to the limits and liabilities of approaches based upon one particular understanding of human relationships and the conception of interpersonal interactions following from it. In addition, this proposal may not be limited to use in Asian American churches. Just as some Western medical practitioners have become open to the appropriateness and benefits of acupuncture for certain health problems, leaders of congregations seeking alternatives to surgery-like conflict management processes may want to explore acupuncture-like approaches.

SELECTED RESOURCES

Augsburger, David. *Conflict Mediation across Cultures: Pathways and Patterns*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992.

Kendis, Kaoru Oguri. *A Matter of Comfort: Ethnic Maintenance and Ethnic Style among Third-Generation Japanese Americans*. New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1989.

King, Ambrose Yeo-chi. "Kuan-Hsi and Network Building: A Sociological Interpretation." In "The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today." *Daedalus* 120, no. 2 (Spring, 1991): pp. 63-84.

Lebra, Takie Sugiyama. "Nonconfrontational Strategies for Management of Interpersonal Conflicts." In *Conflict in Japan*, ed. E. S. Krauss, T. P. Rohlen, P. G. Steinhoff. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984. Pp. 41-60.

Perrow, Charles. *Complex Organizations: A Critical Essay*. 3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986.

Originally published in Congregations: The Alban Journal 21, no. 6 (November - December 1995): pp. 16-19.

Teach Us to Needle, Needle Us to Learn

A Response to Virstan Choy's "From Surgery to Acupuncture" by David W Augsburger

Virstan B. Y. Choy has pricked our over-inflated trust in direct, dialogical, open-system processes for resolving conflict. He has almost painlessly needled the swollen cultural egos that assume multicultural applicability to Western theories (which don't work that well for us, we Westerners might admit). He has practised the same acupuncture in his tactful writing, which, as he observes, is necessary in Asian conflict resolution.

He has inserted long—very long—needles that reach to several of the Western basic assumptions that lie deep in our social and personal psyches. He has nudged our neural nodes to let go, let be, and let ourselves see other visions.

Western conflict assumptions—basic assumptions that lie beneath the theory and practice of conflict interventions—axe commonly shaped by three metaphors: War, sports, and business. In war, survival is at stake, is everything. In sports, achievement is central, winning is everything. In business, profit is the bottom line, success is all. Inevitably, the other party in the conflict will be seen as an opponent who must be conquered, a heretic who must be silenced, an enemy who must be excluded, a devil who must be destroyed.

All conflicts, in this dualistic vision, are either competitive or collaborative, destructive or constructive, malignant or benign (see the works of Morton Deutsch, Rollo May, and Erich Fromm). When we split all conflict into two types, we get seduced into "either/or" thinking. We split from others because we are splitting inside. We fragment in the face of conflict and our thinking becomes more concrete, more polarised, more divisive. We are divided selves. In the end, disputes are "either-or" dilemmas. Either we will win or lose, live or die.

Where the West is either/or, the Asian world begins from both/and. Harmony and solidarity are central values that presuppose complementarity. In the Indic and African worlds, there are many groups that prefer a third option—neither/nor. Neither party is assumed right, neither will win. Instead the community will create a solution that resolves the dispute and that they—not the disputants—own. The three options; competition, complementarity, or creativity—offer deeply contrasting outcomes even as they begin from very different basic assumptions. Of course, mediators in every culture make use of all three approaches, but the starting point, the dominant process, the preferred outcome are strongly shaped by the primary metaphor.

- Westerners *feel better* when the parties in a dispute are talking openly again;
- Westerners are *more comfortable* when the issues are named, defined, placed on the table by both sides;
- Westerners *trust* direct negotiations, immediate conversations, candid exploration, mutual authentic/vulnerable give-and-take;
- Westerners *relax* as resolution moves toward face-to-face reconciliation symbolised by a handshake or a hug.

These are signs that constructive, collaborative, benign processes are being used to choose the *right* outcome in the *right* way (for the vindication of those who are right).

"Ultimately we must choose; finally someone must yield; eventually the right will prevail." Westerners believe in deeply held cultural myths of the righteous individual triumphing over the evil conspiracy. Of course, there are multiple myths, varied assumptions, diverse expectations, but communal solidarity is feared as cultic or is left to the Amish and the triumph of the majority is the best we can hope for. Surgery is necessary. Amputation may be regrettably required. A transplant (get rid of the old leadership and import the new) may be the only way to save lives. And since Western know-how is better, other groups (especially those who are non-dominant cultures within our world because they are not like us) should learn our conflict theory, profit from our research, gain from our wisdom ("Scratch any person in the world and under the surface there's an American trying to get out," imperialism teaches us.)

Not only do distinctive Hispanic, Arabic, Indian, Asian, and African American conflict patterns differ sharply from the dominant Western models, they have much to teach us. The exchange is clearly mutual, two-way, with equal contributions to make. In conflict theory, the playing field is far more level than we have been able or willing to see.

Virstan Choy, writing to Asian and Asian American congregations, offers a clear challenge to Western models: prizing relationship, seeking to preserve relational integrity, utilising the predisposition toward harmony and solidarity, and utilising the polarities and the paradoxes of solidarity to work out the tensions in relationship and the contrasts in goals creatively.

The metaphor of acupuncture is intriguing and at the same time illuminatingly clear. In acupuncture, one deciphers the energy flow, identifies the nodal trigger points, and makes an invisible intervention. Skilled leadership in conflict situations can take clear non-

anxious positions with the right people in the system to activate positive cycles of change. Rather than raising the anxiety in the system, as Kurt Lewin has taught us, this reduces it by gently removing a block or reducing a drive. Third-party processes become the art of making new connections, disconnecting old binds and bonds.

Carl Whitaker, the family therapist, once likened his work to the miming of Charlie Chaplin. When he was young, he danced with the footwork of a genius, but as he grew old, Chaplin, the little clown, became a minimalist. Gone were the steps and the flowing gestures. Instead, everything could be said by bowing the head and lightly lifting the hat. "What I do in therapy, as I grow older," Whitaker said, "is like Chaplin's simple gesture. I want to forget the footwork and learn when to lift my hat."

That is acupuncture. To know the trigger point. To release the nervous energy. To heal.

Lead on, Asian churches. Lead on in your own unique wisdom on the healing process. Lead out in this challenging other groups' assumptions through kind of dialogue. Our surgery has not been all that successful. We have much to learn.

Originally published in Congregations: The Alban Journal 22, no. 1 (January-February 1996): pp. 18-19.

Making My World View Visible

A Response to Virstan Choy's "From Surgery to Acupuncture" by Alice Mann

Virstan Choy, in his essay on church conflict "from an Asian American perspective" makes several important contributions to the field of congregation development. Most directly, he provides some possible criteria for deciding what kinds of assistance might be appropriate for congregations rooted in Asian cultures. Choy urges the use of methods that acknowledge this group's:

- relational orientation;
- predisposition toward preserving relationship; preference for nonconfrontational interaction; and,
- capacity for solidarity in the face of conflict.

Such guidance helps pastors, consultants, and denominational staff to respond better to specific cultural environments. But Choy's work raises (in my mind) larger issues than "proper techniques" for Asian American congregations. I'd like to identify three important conversations that might grow out of Choy's

observations.

1. We need to set in cultural context the entire body of knowledge about congregation development. When I tell a group "what the literature says" or "what we know" about conflict resolution, a whole reef of questions lies hidden below the surface of my statements. What culture has generated the ideas I am presenting? What historical period do they reflect? What sources of wisdom have been honoured and ignored in constructing those ideas? Which voices have established the terms of the conversation, and which have been relegated to the status of "others"?

Virstan Choy challenges me as a practitioner to note the cultural context of my own assertions and to avoid a stance equivalent to the "omniscient narrator" in literature—a disembodied voice that purports to reveal what is really happening in this situation and these characters. During my stint as a graduate student in English, I was especially grateful to the novelist Russell Banks for his insistence that a white author is obligated to make visible in her work the racial and ethnic components (and limitations) of her own world view. I find myself wondering now how this same ethical commitment can be reflected in the work of congregation development—how the "unmarked" categories (white, European American, middle class) can carry their proper labels, so that I do not present myself as the "omniscient narrator" of a multicultural story, a reality that cannot be fully described from a single frame of reference.

2. "Cultural differences" between men and women might be explored in relation to Virstan Choy's 5 criteria. The work of researchers like Deborah Tannen suggests that distinctive male and female subcultures may interact to create the larger "culture" of a people. Some would say that women (or should we say "white middle-class women in the U.S.?"?) tend to emphasise the relational in their communication patterns. If this is so, we might find some common ground between Asian American voices and feminist/womanist voices in the church.

I would proceed cautiously, however, in defining what that common ground might be. American women of European background may tend to worry about preserving relationships more than our male counterparts do—but we both have a narrow, atomistic definition of "relationship" compared to men and women from cultures with a livelier sense of communal identity.

3. "Mainstream churches" may be challenged by Asian American congregations to reassess the relative value of disclosure and privacy. Choy's work sheds new light for me on the current preoccupation—both in the wider culture and in religious systems—with disclosure as opposed to privacy. Following Barry

Johnson and others, we might identify disclosure and privacy as a “polarity”—a creative tension between opposites—which must be managed rather than resolved in order for a community to remain healthy. A polarity resembles a set of scales tipping back and forth between two “weighty” values. What I learned from Choy’s essay is that the fulcrum (or balancing post) of the scale doesn’t fall in the same place for every culture because the “good” at one end may not be given exactly the same weight as the “good” at the other end.

Privacy (or “personal space”) is a positive value, to be held in tension with self-disclosure (or transparency, or “openness”) for the health of persons and communities. The downside of privacy—secrecy—seems at the moment to be condemned as the cardinal sin in mainstream American culture, and for some good reasons. Secrecy tends to favour and perpetuate existing power structures. The illegitimate power of Iran-Contra conspirators depended on secrecy, and so does the tyranny of a parent (or pastor) who is sexually abusing a child.

On the other hand, we can see the downside of exposure in the emotional “feeding frenzy” that occurs when authority figures (civil servants, parents, clergy) are accused of serious violations of trust. Churches will pay a high price in the long run if we remain in that mode regarding clergy sexual abuse—if, for example, judicatory materials on clergy background checks express an appropriately high concern for the person reporting abuse, but do not articulate a similar commitment to due process for an accused person. We can also see the destructive side of exposure in the format of the less responsible talk shows, where traumatised people are encouraged to tell all for the sake of public entertainment and private profit. Choy’s discussion of “face” may help the rest of us do some re-evaluation of the way we deal with matters involving shame. If we listen to our own imagery (red-faced, egg on the face, slap in the face), we will discover that concern with “face” is not unique to Asian cultures. From listening to others who weigh these competing “goods” somewhat differently, we might gain greater perspective on our current choices, and swing less recklessly from cover-up to witch-hunt and back again.

Originally published in Congregations: The Alban Journal 22, no. 1 (January-February 1996): pp. 19-20.

Mediation: What Can We Learn from the Chinese?

By Margaret E. Bruehl

In May of 1989, I spent three weeks in China, as a delegate representing the Alban Institute, with the People to People Citizen Ambassador Program. The delegation was invited by the Chinese Ministry of Justice to engage in a professional exchange with lawyers, judges, and mediators.

Our focus was to examine alternate dispute-resolution techniques practised in the People’s Republic of China. As an Alban consultant I was most interested in the mediation that took place with families, in neighbourhoods, and at the work place, and the potential application for our churches.

I was surprised to discover that while China’s Community Mediation system has its roots in ancient community traditions, it has become an increasingly important component in the nation’s legal system over the years. Mediation, rather than litigation, is the prevailing method of dispute resolution. The mediation system operates under the direction of the Ministry of Justice, which has a department in each province or city that is responsible for setting guidelines for the committees and is advised and aided by legal assistants and the courts of law.

The provincial departments give assistance in setting up work groups (the Mediation Committees), in establishing procedures, and in training mediators. They encourage mediators to exchange information and they praise their “good work and good deeds.” They help them analyse how disputes arise and inform them on what tendencies to expect. For example, crowded living conditions create many disputes about use of kitchen and toilet facilities. Mid-summer is a peak period for disputes between neighbours because of the large numbers of persons congregating outdoors. The style of the mediator may be very informal, as in carrying a message between two feuding neighbours, or quite formal, as when someone submits an application to an elected municipal People’s Mediation Committee, which must be followed up by contacting the involved parties to determine whether they are amenable to mediation. Mediation is voluntary, and thus must be agreed on.

Chinese mediation practice is based on a value system tied to a deep respect for family—especially elders—to the acceptance of authority, and to holding an obligation to that authority in their culture. Each neighbourhood community, village, and urban district has a Mediation Committee, as do the social and political organisations, enterprises, and factories. In 1989, mediators numbered 6.2 million in the country. This provides a network of mediators throughout

China that is convenient to the people in all settings and areas of life.

Chinese mediation emphasises harmony, upholding of good morals, maintaining a good attitude, knowing the difference between right and wrong, being correct, and saving face. Disharmony is not only a reflection on the parties engaged in a dispute but also on their families; it is thought to be a comment on their inability to conform to the behavioural norms that are the unifying substance of Chinese society.

American culture functions differently. By contrast, we emphasise privacy and individual rights rather than collective rights. Families are frequently scattered or are loosely connected. Members of congregations attend their churches for a variety of reasons and they alone determine their degree of participation, interaction, and contribution. In light of these and other cultural differences, is the potential for using the Chinese mediation process for dispute resolution in our congregations limited or impossible?

In China, mediators are a work unit. The qualifications for selection are fairness, patience, sincerity, and warm-heartedness. They are expected to have good relations with people, to love mediation work, and to have some knowledge of the law. Most are workers or neighbourhood people who work on a voluntary basis, and committees usually consist of three to 11 persons.

Can we consider such a work unit in our congregations—an elected committee requiring similar qualifications for selection? For example, could small groups of persons, trained in mediation skills, manage some internal congregational problems and grievances? I am intrigued with the possibility of using such a group of elected, respected persons to act as bridge builders, mediators, troubleshooters, and teachers in congregational settings. These persons could be expected to have an interest in people and in relations between and among people, to take training in mediation skills and methods, and to have a knowledge of the denominational structure and law that governs their church. Could competent trainees accept such a responsibility? Would parishioners be open to using such a service?

Before taking on the responsibility either to train as a mediator or to accept the help of one, parishioners would need to know what a mediator does. In summary, the mediator is an acceptable, impartial third party with no authoritative decision-making power. The mediator assists persons who are in disagreement or tension with one another, or who are involved in disputes, to reach mutually agreeable solutions. There are two stages to the mediation process. In the first stage, prior to joint mediation sessions, the mediator explores the situation with the individual persons involved, describes the mediator's role and function, and determines with the individuals an agreeable approach for how they will handle the difficulty. A decision to work with the mediator is construed as a first agreement, and a time and place is mutually determined for the next step in the mediation process. It is important in this premediation stage to build credibility as a neutral facilitator, to clarify the sequence of steps that will be used in mediation, and to practice conciliation—aimed at correcting perception, reducing unreasonable fears, and improving communication so that reasonable discussion can take place when the individuals meet together. Patience and focus are essential.

During the second stage, the mediator explains how the mediation process will take place, including the use of separate caucus sessions as a normal procedure (for instance, when a time to vent feelings is needed or to test potential agreements) and possibly setting guidelines for behaviour during mediation sessions (for instance, having one person speak at a time or asking questions for clarification only). Following the preparation period, the mediator assists the parties in beginning productive negotiation by identifying the important issues and building an agenda for discussion. Interests are identified that underlie the positions either of the individuals has taken, and conciliation practices continue. Once that has been accomplished, options for solution are invented and then assessed. Finally, the interacting parties make decisions that take each of their needs into account. In mediation training, each step of this process is developed and practised.