

Explosive issues: Emotional disarmament

by [Carl S. Dudley](#)

This article appears in the [March 3, 1999](#) issue.

Sometimes society faces issues that seem to defy rational solution. They excite extraordinary tensions, and participants in debate find that simple language is misunderstood and motives are vilified. In the 20th century this level of irrational hostility has exploded around such issues as the right of labor to organize, women's suffrage, desegregation and abortion. Welcoming homosexual people into full membership and positions of leadership in the church is this kind of "killer" issue.

Speed Leas, an experienced consultant in congregational crises, describes the highest level of conflict as an emotional condition in which one side wants to destroy the opposition, literally to kill the enemy (*Moving Your Church Through Conflict*, Alban Institute). He identifies a slightly lower level of conflict which is the "fight or flight" condition: each side is willing to engage the other, but both still have the freedom to withdraw from conflict.

When questions of accepting homosexuals into mainline churches arise, many people have such powerful and unexamined emotions that the conflict immediately reaches those high levels of intensity. Homosexuals, like abortion doctors, have been murdered in raw outbursts of emotional resistance. In fairness, we have also seen strong emotions at the staunchly liberal end of the spectrum-but never at the "kill the enemy" stage.

Church leaders should not underestimate the challenge of developing constructive communication in the midst of such irrational and explosive conditions. Managing conflict in such situations can be likened to trying to worship when grenades are rolling under the pews. In the congregations we know best, we have found an irrational anger that often overwhelms efforts to explore differing views on sexual orientation.

Our argument is this: leaders cannot expect church members, with their unexamined sexual identities and unrecognized passions, to welcome homosexuals into the church through a customary process of deliberation. Congregations cannot broach such an issue as if it could be settled through rational discussion and democratic decisions. Until church members, gay and straight, deal with their own gut feelings, they will not be able to use their heads about homosexuality.

Using time-tested governance procedures, congregations often attempt to assess the facts, examine scriptural and historical precedents, consider alternatives, encourage participation in open debate, allocate responsibilities to proper authorities, and finally reach a decision. Then they are surprised when the congregation explodes.

Until people's emotions have been engaged in a pastoral way, "facts," "research," "open forums" and especially "issue-debating meetings" are likely to contribute to escalating confrontations, polarizing power struggles and ugly exchanges that leave deep wounds in the hearts of both individuals and groups.

Some pastors trigger members' explosive responses by acting on their own to accept homosexual persons into the congregation. When such actions take the congregation by surprise, members can feel confused and betrayed. Such independent gestures by pastors and lay leaders have polarized churches, inflamed irrational and unconstructive conflict, and resulted in membership loss and pastor relocation. Since the action has already occurred, it's too late for negotiation or compromise. In such cases it is problematic but not impossible to restore members' trust and reexamine the emotional foundations of the conflict. All members, including gays and lesbians (acknowledged or unrecognized), must feel that their emotions have been honored and their fears understood before they will respond to such an initiative. And the social and personal shame of all members must be transformed if they are to rediscover their unity in Christ.

We face an apparent contradiction: typical democratic decision-making procedures are inadequate for handling such emotionally charged material, yet members must be involved in the discussion. We believe that leaders must act in prophetic ways, yet not break the basic trust that binds people and pastor together.

We suggest three approaches that leaders can use to disarm "killer" issues. First, leaders can focus more on living their faith than on abstract arguments. Second,

they can tell stories rather than argue. Leaders can help create a place where people can safely talk about previously unspeakable forms of love and friendship. Third, pastors and church leaders at all levels can focus more on being trusted as persons. In this way, leaders can guide an assembly in making faith the ground for determining its position. And the Holy Spirit may still work unexpected miracles.

Authentic leaders make their witness in the midst of our human frailty. Being prophetic is being personally accountable, not infallible. Congregations respond well to prophetic leaders who tell their own stories with candor, and who invite and model dialogues with members as partners in ministry. Authentic leaders are powerfully prophetic when they speak not from heights of revelation, but as peers and partners with their members.

Trust is the key element of leadership, more important than theological position or leadership style. Trust sustains congregations in facing explosive issues. Trusted pastors and church leaders bring congregations through the decision-making process so they are stronger on the other side. Such trust takes time to build, and even old-timers are tested in new crises. In the crunch, however, members want spiritual depth, personal vulnerability and lifelong authenticity. Trusted pastors do not spring surprises on their members. Members may not agree with the position the pastor takes, but they will respect prophetic challenge from a trusted leader. At least at the emotional level they can honor the sexual orientation of all their members- and by extension all people- on the basis of the personal authenticity that gives ministries their power. In the same way, pastors must honor the authentic feelings of their members, since cynicism on either side is poison for both.

We propose an emotional disarmament to prepare the space for discussion. The fear, shame and distrust that surround issues of homosexuality require an admission of feelings before a presentation of reasons. People can then emotionally disarm in the peace of Christ and find ways to address issues together, and create a congregational space that is openly shared by straights and gays.