

Research points to humility as an aid in clergy conflict with their congregations

by [David Briggs](#) in the [August 17, 2016](#) issue

Fostering humility, intellectual humility in particular, is a way to reduce congregational conflict, according to recent studies.

New research suggests that the more pastors are perceived to be intellectually humble, the more likely they are to be forgiven by people who took offense at something they said or did.

This was especially the case in one study for perceived transgressions in the area of religious beliefs, values, or convictions, core areas of religious identity that have the potential to tear congregations asunder.

All congregations are going to go through “relational wear and tear,” and the tension can be particularly high when strongly held religious beliefs are threatened, researchers said.

But humble clergy who model openness and mutual respect may provide the “social oil” that keeps the congregation from overheating and breaking under the strain, new research indicates.

Nearly all religions uphold the virtue of humility. But they do not always get it right.

For example, humility interpreted as unquestioning obedience in defense of an institution made many religious officials deaf to the cries of victims of clergy sexual abuse of children.

And both conservative and liberal religious leaders with a sense of grandiosity are prone to proclamations that divide Christians along political and cultural lines.

But humility as it is being defined by scores of interdisciplinary studies is not about authoritarian attitudes or self-flagellation or being a whipping post for the congregation.

Humility involves being oriented toward others and having an accurate view of one’s strengths and weaknesses.

Intellectual humility includes being open to new ideas and being able to regulate arrogance.

Thus, intellectually humble individuals are able to present their own ideas “in a nonoffensive manner and receive contrary ideas without taking offense,” said researchers reporting on studies of intellectual humility and religious leadership.

The team, led by Georgia State University researchers, found intellectual humility was associated with higher levels of trust, openness, and agreeableness.

In one study, researchers surveyed 105 undergraduates who had felt betrayed by a religious leader. The offenses ranged from being kicked out of a small group for asking too many questions to finding out a religious leader was stealing money.

People who rated the religious leader higher in intellectual humility were less likely to withhold forgiveness or seek revenge. They were more likely to retain a sense of good will toward the leader.

A separate study of transgressions by religious leaders yielded similar results among undergraduates.

“The more victims perceived the religious leader to have intellectual humility, the more they reported being able to forgive him or her,” reported the study’s researchers, led by Joshua Hook of the University of North Texas.

The study team replicated its results in another independent sample. The second study also found the relation between intellectual humility and forgiveness was stronger when related to conflict in the area of religious beliefs and convictions as opposed to financial, sexual, or other transgressions.

So even when dealing with an area as sensitive as faith, “intellectual humility toward religion may be an effective way to help repair damaged relationships when such conflict inevitably occurs,” the University of North Texas study concluded.

More than six in ten congregations reported some kind of conflict in the past five years, according to the 2015 Faith Communities Today survey.

Disagreements can be healthy as congregations evaluate how they can best meet the spiritual needs of their communities. Some negative reaction to the introduction of new music or other outreach efforts to broaden church membership may be the

necessary precursor to growth and mission, church officials note.

But conflict also can be painful.

More than a quarter of all congregations experienced a conflict that led some people to leave the congregation in the two years prior to when they responded to the survey, according to the 2006–2007 National Congregations Study. Nine percent of congregations experienced a conflict that led to the departure of clergy or other religious leaders.

Findings from the studies on religious leaders are consistent with a developing body of research that indicates perceived humility can help repair social bonds.

In one study, college students who had been hurt in a romantic relationship within the last two months were more likely to forgive an offender they perceived as being humble.

Don E. Davis of Georgia State University, a leading researcher on humility, said, “If either two people in a relationship or a small group or even a community generally has a norm of humility, it seems like it creates a context for people to care about each other and to show compassion to each other and be a part of something that’s bigger than themselves.” —theARDA.com

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