

Conflict and Reconciliation: Three Diocesan Needs

When it comes to addressing conflict and reconciliation within an Anglican Diocese, there are three typical needs:

- How to address escalated or protracted parish conflicts;
- How to change the culture of how Christians handle tensions and conflict; and
- How to engage with inequalities in society and strengthen local communities.

This handout offers a brief reflection on some options to address these three needs. It also outlines Reconciliation Initiatives' distinctive offering in relation to the third of these, through the *API Reconciling Mission* programme.

1. How to address escalated or protracted parish conflicts

This is essentially a complex *ministry* challenge. There will always be occasional local parish conflicts where the tensions escalate to such a degree that outside help is needed. Sometimes these conflicts are protracted and long-standing. Typically, an approach may be made to the Bishop or Archdeacon, with a request for them to intervene in addressing the conflict. However, such conflicts are often complicated and time-consuming to address, requiring time which senior staff rarely have available to give.

One option is for the Diocese to establish a small team of mediators who can respond to such situations. Bridge Builders has produced a booklet entitled 'Making Mediation Work in the Church of England' which provides guidance on establishing a diocesan mediation team. The type of 'fire-fighting' work that is involved in addressing escalated conflicts requires some significant mediatory skills and expertise to address effectively. One route is to gather a small pool of local professional mediators. Another route is to train up a group from within the Diocese, for example via Bridge Builders' foundational and advanced training courses.

2. How to change the culture of how Christians handle tensions and conflict

This is fundamentally a *discipleship training* challenge. Within much of the church there is a prevailing culture of niceness which means that Christians, including clergy, can be reluctant to face and address conflict. However, the nature of any community life is that there will always be some relational conflicts and tensions over differences: these are inevitable.

Organisations such as Bridge Builders and Place for Hope offer foundational training for clergy to equip them with confidence, new thinking and process skills to enable them to face into tensions and conflict, and to work more effectively with others amidst disagreement. Bridge Builders has also published a training resource with CPAS, *Growing Bridgebuilders: Changing How We Handle Conflict* (230 copies in circulation, but currently out of print), to equip those who have been trained to share learning with others in the churches which they serve.

Some Dioceses have developed their own local training for clergy and lay people on handling tensions and conflict, and this can be a cost-effective way to share skills and learning. Alternatively, services such as Bridge Builders can be commissioned to run tailored training for specific groups. In addition, there are some useful publications, such as *Bridgebuilding: Making Peace with Conflict in the Church* by Alastair McKay (Canterbury Press, 2019), which include discussion questions for group study and reflection.



3. How to engage with inequalities in society and strengthen local communities

This is essentially a *missional* challenge. Since the economic crisis of 2008, with the ensuing austerity measures by central government, there has been an increase in social hardship and inequalities. The viral pandemic of 2020 is compounding matters. Added to this are the ongoing environmental issues facing the world, and a heightened awareness of racial injustice.

The *API Reconciling Mission* programme has been developed by Reconciliation Initiatives to address this challenge. It is also intended as a visionary approach for the emerging future of the church, in the light of the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic. The programme connects with the enduring five Anglican marks of mission, with an emphasis on offering good news to the world around these three marks:

- To respond to human need by loving service
- To transform unjust structures of society, and to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, & sustain and renew the life of the earth

The *API Reconciling Mission* programme offers a framework for understanding the church's mission as part of a journey towards greater reconciliation in society, which echoes God's reconciling work in the world. This incorporates addressing basic human needs, raising awareness of injustice, challenging the system, and negotiating change as elements in releasing a foretaste of heaven here on earth. These involve addressing conflict in the world, and hence there is a direct connection with improving how Christians handle tensions and conflict.

The programme offers practical tools to enable the church to engage more deeply with local neighbourhoods. This has emerged as a priority during the current viral pandemic. The approach draws on an asset-based development model, which explores a community's strengths and needs, and works to strengthen relationships across a neighbourhood. Through such an approach, the church can help to address inequalities and play a part in promoting greater reconciliation within society, especially at a local level.

Further information on the *API Reconciling Mission* programme is given on a separate handout.

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