

# Transforming Church Conflict



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*Compassionate Leadership in Action*

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*For our families, our students, and dear friends in the NVC community.*



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While I first became acquainted with Marshall Rosenberg's work in 1987 in the context of my study of psychology and pastoral care, it was not until 2004 that I glimpsed its transformative promise. In my first nine-day international intensive training, the teaching and skill of Robert Gonzales helped me find hope in the wake of my despair about the United States' decision to wage war against Iraq. During the next six years, I received countless gifts from the Nonviolent Communication (NVC) community—gifts of insight, compassion, love, and companionship—as I undertook intensive NVC study, training, and practice. I am indebted especially to NVC trainers, Inbal and Miki Kashtan, Susan Skye, Robert Gonzales, Dominic Barter, and countless others who have enriched my life and given me a renewed appreciation for the healing and energizing power of community. The students at Princeton Theological Seminary, with their hunger for learning and growth, have kept alive my love for this work. Finally, the love, faithfulness, challenge, and support of my family undergirds and upholds me every day of my life. I thank God for you daily.

Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger



I first discovered Nonviolent Communication at a time in my life when, unbeknownst to me, I desperately needed it. Ruptures in close relationships, animosity in my denomination, and the challenge of living well as I completed a doctoral degree and worked as a pastor called for new

capacities in staying connected to God, myself, and others. Though initially tentative—given my intellectual questions about NVC—I eventually threw myself headlong into the NVC community. I am particularly grateful to Robert Gonzales, Susan Skye, and Myra Walden, from whom I not only have learned the skills of compassionate communication but also have received an abundance of empathy and care. With the 2008 LIFE (Learning & Integration, Full Embodiment) program cohort, I experienced the delight of fellowship in the Spirit, which comes both as a gift and from a common commitment to seeing and hearing one another, bearing one another's burdens, and participating in one another's healing and growth. My students, two NVC practice groups, and the leaders of Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church have inspired me by persisting in authentic relationships in the midst of anxiety and ambiguity. Most of all, I am deeply grateful to friends and family whose single-minded and openhearted love nourishes my soul daily.

Theresa F. Latini

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# Introduction

## Living Peaceably with All

“If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

Romans 12:18

The apostle Paul’s exhortation to the church at Rome stands as a powerful challenge to the church in America today. Congregations floundering in intractable conflict may read such words with incredulity; how, they may wonder, is it possible to live peaceably with those determined to get their way at any cost? Congregations recovering from clergy misconduct may be seething with so much anger that any vision of peace is completely untenable unless yoked to an understanding of a justice that includes real repentance. Congregations in mainline Protestant denominations rent apart by polarizing discourse may be so disheartened that they are tempted to withdraw altogether. The complexity of church life today in myriad subcultures, both religious and cultural, makes any kind of true and lasting peace sometimes seem completely out of reach. How are pastors and church leaders to tackle such complexity with any clarity of purpose or vision of a happy outcome?

Pastors burn out at an alarming rate, and lay leaders grow weary of keeping all the church’s programs afloat. Both pastors and lay leaders falter under the weight of their own and others’ expectations to do it all—to develop programming in adult education, youth groups, and Sunday school; to provide pastoral care for the sick and dying; to work with church committees and governing boards; to preach every Sunday; and, perhaps most difficult, to maintain harmonious relationships with people who won’t talk to them directly about their concerns but complain instead to their friends and neighbors. These are not the only challenges church leaders face.

What about the pastoral care situation in which siblings come together over the imminent death of a brother after being estranged for decades? Each blames the others for the hurt, anger, loneliness, and emptiness that they feel inside, but no one wishes to take responsibility for contributing to the impasse. How can a pastor guide such a family in untangling the chaotic threads of a lifetime of mutual resentment?

Scripture exhorts us to live in harmony with others, taking “thought for what is noble in the sight of all” (Rom. 12:17) no matter what our circumstances. It encourages us to practice hospitality toward strangers as well as compassionate care toward those we consider our enemies. We are not to repay evil for evil but to overcome evil with good. Such a vision could be exhilarating, serving as a beacon of hope, but for those mired in conflict, it might be more disheartening than inspiring. When we consider the interpersonal impasses, entrenched power struggles, and ongoing frustration at many levels of the church’s common life, we might admit to seasons of hopelessness. The violence that we deplore in the world exists, if we are honest, in our own hearts as well. Though we may not have murdered our brother or sister, there are times when we might admit to harboring feelings of murderous rage. When we find ourselves caught up in a polarized struggle, we may rightly wonder how we can serve as ambassadors of reconciliation.

How is it possible to retain an authentic connection to the New Testament’s enduring vision of reconciliation in today’s church? Can conflict in the church be transformed so that it revitalizes the church rather than enervates it? We are writing this book because we believe that with skilled and compassionate leadership, conflict can be honestly confronted and transformed at every level of church life. Moreover, when we dedicate ourselves to learning certain skills, not only is the conflict transformed, but so are we. Though the skills we will describe obviously cannot usher in the promised kingdom of God—for no human undertaking can bring about the redemption we long for—they can keep churches connected to a common vision and working together toward life-giving purposes. For the past nine years we have both been immersed in intensive study of *nonviolent* or *compassionate communication* as developed by Marshall Rosenberg. In our personal experiences, and in the lives of the students, pastors, and lay leaders that we have taught, we have witnessed inspiring parables of grace in which paralyzing conflict has been transformed into caring connection. Compassionate communication has taught us how to:

1. transform criticism into opportunities for mutual understanding;
2. stay in dialogue in the midst of difference and disagreement;

3. heal pain from unresolved conflict, guilt, and shame;
4. express ourselves so that we are heard more fully;
5. develop compassion for ourselves and others;
6. transform anger so that others will take our urgent needs to heart;
7. mediate between two or more others, helping them to speak the truth in love; and
8. build authentic community based on honesty and empathy.

We have become convinced that *nonviolent or compassionate communication* is the best single resource available for learning the complex interpersonal and pastoral leadership skills needed by today's church. This is the motivation for writing this book: to describe the knowledge and skills that offer such promise and to place them into theological context so that they can function as a practical guide for revitalizing the church.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) emerged in an era of ferment and change. In the turbulent 1960s, Marshall Rosenberg, a clinical psychologist, became increasingly disturbed by the dissension, antagonism, and violence he witnessed. Having moved to Detroit as a child in the 1940s, he had already lived through a race riot that left more than forty people dead. "Why," he wondered, "were some people able to respond compassionately to others under the most terrible conditions, while others became exploitative and violent?"<sup>1</sup> He longed to find a way to facilitate mutual respect among people, particularly those who were violently at odds with each other. Rosenberg believed that the entire culture desperately needed the invaluable skills of empathy and honesty that formed the core of his training as a psychologist. He thus sought to develop an educational model that would teach these skills to anyone who wished to practice them in everyday interactions. He has spent virtually his entire career developing this model. With a special charisma for this work, he has mediated between warring tribes in Rwanda, between Palestinians and Jews in the Middle East, and between gang members and police in the inner cities of the United States.

During the past twenty years, NVC has grown into an international training and peacemaking organization<sup>2</sup> with certified trainers and teams in more than thirty countries. It is taught in prisons and schools, community centers, and universities. Preschool teachers even use it with toddlers and teach it to their parents. Practice groups have sprung up around the world. Online courses, leadership training programs, and intensive residential workshops are offered every year by a wide variety of instructors.<sup>3</sup>

College, university, and seminary professors have developed courses contextualized for particular subject areas.<sup>4</sup>

We are writing this book for church leaders because we believe that these skills can contribute significantly to the flourishing of Christian ministry. In a foreword to Peter Steinke's book, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, Bishop Rick Foss writes: "Whether conflicting approaches to mission and ministry lead to creativity and growth or to polarized stand-offs is largely a matter of how the key leaders are able to respond to the situation."<sup>5</sup> When a church is in conflict, most pastors and leaders are as well. The conflict, in other words, does not reside *outside* the pastor or only among the church's most vocal members. It resides within every person in the church. We internalize our context and are an integral part of the emotional system in which we reside. This is why the anxiety that runs through the church also runs right through the heart of every pastor or church leader. Non-anxious presence—that interpersonal ability to stay focused and calm in the midst of emotional chaos—does *not* mean that the skilled pastor or leader is in fact *not feeling* anxious. On the contrary: in the midst of an emotional maelstrom, pastors, being human, are inevitably affected by the anxiety of the systems in which they work. As Edwin Friedman argues in his classic work *Generation to Generation: Family Systems in Church and Synagogue*, the anxiety of the work system can significantly raise the level of anxiety in the home and vice versa. Any model that intends to transform conflict on a systems level needs to begin with the person of the leader. For this reason, we shift our focus throughout each of the chapters, moving from the leader's core needs to those of the community, to various interpersonal conflicts that affect the emotional system, whether in a family or church committee. In every case, *how leaders position themselves vis-à-vis the conflict is the key to transformation.*

Conflict need not be destructive. In fact, conflict faced honestly is far healthier for any individual or community than suppressed or denied conflict. There is a great deal of difference between conflict and violence. Violence is always destructive. It inflicts anguish, and often enduring trauma, on persons, communities, and nations. Conflict, when openly acknowledged and courageously embraced, can be constructive. When undertaken with an attitude of hope and expectation, and with certain skills in hand, open conflict can actually be life-giving. In her groundbreaking book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, Jean Baker Miller writes:



Conflict, seen in its fullest sense, is not necessarily threatening or destructive. Quite the contrary. . . . We all grow via conflict. . . . Growth requires engagement with difference and with people embodying that difference. If differences were more openly acknowledged, we could allow for, and even encourage, an increasingly strong expression by each party of his or her experience. This would lead to greater clarity for self, greater ability to fulfill one's own needs, and more facility to respond to others. There would be a chance at individual and mutual satisfaction, growth, and even joy.<sup>6</sup>

When the church is bogged down in what seems to be an intractable conflict, and when the leaders of the church have little skill or confidence in engaging that conflict openly, it is little wonder that so few imagine conflict as an opportunity to find mutual satisfaction, growth, or joy.

By teaching three skills sets—self-empathy, empathy, and honest expression—and by grounding these skills in the gospel's overarching aims, we hope to contribute to the living out of this vision of mutual joy. The more deeply we are each rooted and grounded in the love of God, the further we can reach out to others with the compassion that we ourselves have received. Leaders who work from a place of mutuality and joy have a wellspring of compassion toward others, even those with whom they disagree.

At the beginning of the third millennium we live in an increasingly complex world marked by rapid change in every sphere of life: political, economic, communal, religious, and domestic. Such widespread and ongoing change gives rise to pervasive feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, sometimes even fear. The church lives in the midst of this maelstrom of change. It is called to be responsive to the world, to serve it gladly, and to witness to God's compassionate care in the midst of its anxious foreboding. Theological educators are particularly concerned about training ministers who have the capacity to provide compassionate leadership in these challenging times. We want ministers not only to serve the members of their congregations faithfully but also to provide vision and leadership as each congregation seeks to serve the world.

The church also needs leaders who negotiate the complexities of the Christian world and cooperate with persons of widely different backgrounds and belief systems. These leaders will need to be so firmly rooted in their Christian identity that they are capable of reaching across profound religious and philosophical differences. They will need to build bridges of understanding with those who do not begin with the same

premises or have the same worldview. They will need to treat those who have a different national identity with honor and respect. They will need to have the personal resources to enter what is unfamiliar and complex with confidence and competence.<sup>7</sup>

The skills of compassionate communication help us to reach across national, religious, cultural, and class boundaries to affirm our common humanity. We live in a world where diverse religious beliefs and practices coexist in the same place, and compassionate communication offers us ways to connect with people who have widely different customs and different understandings of the world, of God, and of the purposes of human life. At the same time, NVC is indispensable in more intimate situations of interpersonal conflict that are crucial to understand for the sake of effective pastoral care. It helps foster mutual understanding between teenagers and their parents, between husbands and wives on the verge of divorce, among family members who envision their lives unfolding in widely divergent ways. Perhaps most important of all, compassionate communication helps us maintain our inner clarity and sense of direction in the midst of challenging situations in which we have significant personal investment. It gives us tools to make healthy and faithful choices when we ourselves are in danger of reacting out of anger rather than responding with compassion. We believe that competence in these skills can mean the difference between success and failure in building bridges with those who are different, whether they are in the pew next to us, the mosque down the street, or in communities across the city or the globe. Equipped with compassionate communication, pastors and church leaders will not only have finely honed their skills in pastoral care and self-care, but they will also have the tools needed to exercise public leadership.

NVC eschews official alignment with any particular religion in order to connect with each person's common humanity. Since religion often divides people, Rosenberg and other practitioners often steer clear from placing NVC into any specific religious context. Instead they emphasize its irreducible spiritual nature. Many will explicitly call it a spiritual practice but are loath to call it a religious one. Indeed, NVC itself does not recommend any specifically religious practices. Nevertheless NVC is practiced by people the world over who are rooted in *particular* religious communities. Over the years we have worked alongside Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, agnostics, New Age seekers, Jews, and Christians across the denominational spectrum who see NVC as an indispensable tool for resolving differences effectively in their respective communities.

We are committed to placing NVC into a specifically Christian context so that it will support the ministry of the church. Our overriding aim in this book is to bring the skills and consciousness of compassionate communication into the worldwide church so that the church can more faithfully live out the gospel of Jesus Christ. We intend to fulfill this aim in three ways:

1. First, we will set forth our understanding of compassionate communication in concrete, practical, and accessible terms, describing the specific skill sets needed for effective pastoral and lay leadership.
2. Second, we will delineate some of the theoretical richness that feeds compassionate communication by entering into conversation with closely related psychological theories that both illuminate and deepen our understanding of the need for these skills in resolving difficult situations of conflict.
3. Finally, we will put compassionate communication into theological perspective, engaging its implicit (or explicit) theological assumptions about the nature of humanity in relation to Christian teachings. While acknowledging the conceptual tensions between compassionate communication and Christian theology, we seek to place the core tenets of compassionate communication into a Christian theological framework so that Christian leaders can use it with integrity.

The book begins with a basic overview of compassionate communication, interpreting it theologically in relation to church conflict. Chapters 2–4 teach the basic skills of making clear observations, sharing one’s feelings and needs without judgment or defensiveness, and making requests. As these basic skills are internalized, they provide the foundation for the fundamental skill sets of empathy, self-empathy, and honest expression (chapters 5–7). These skill sets in turn provide the necessary foundation for more advanced capacities: healing hurt through mourning, staying in dialogue when it is difficult, and transforming conflict in community-wide crises (chapters 8–10).<sup>8</sup>

We are persuaded that these skills can help Christian pastors and leaders, as well as people in the pews, to face conflict honestly, to hear one another with mutual understanding, and to live out their vocation with more zest and joy. We trust that they will help the church to live peaceably with all and thus become a more faithful witness to the Prince of Peace.

