

MAKING PEACE: Creating a congregational culture of peacemaking takes time

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NACOGDOCHES—Helping a church become a peaceable fellowship is a never-ending battle, Pastor Kyle Childress acknowledged. But as Christians wage peace within church, they learn skills that help them build bridges in a divided world, he added.

“It’s a round-the-clock, long-term thing,” said Childress, pastor of Austin Heights Baptist Church in Nacogdoches. “In the 17 years I’ve been here, one of the major challenges I consistently have had is helping people learn and practice reconciliation with one another.”

(Photo
illustration by
David Clanton)

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Peacemaking skills don't come naturally, he noted. Reconciliation must be learned.

"A lot of people don't know how to do that. It's hard. I spend a lot of time taking people by the hand—almost literally—and telling them, 'We're going to see so-and-so and work this thing out,'" he said.

"I help them work through the conflict. After they've done it and seen it done, and they see the sky doesn't fall in on them, they're able to do it again and model it for others."

Childress views peacemaking and reconciliation within a church—particularly a small church in a relatively small town where "everybody sees one another all the time"—as essential.

"In the body of Christ, we are connected. So, when there's conflict, the body is broken," he said. "Because we're connected in the church, when we're broken, it affects the whole congregation."

Christians also can learn to be peacemakers beyond their own congregations the same way—by investing the necessary time and energy to build relationships that bridge dividing lines, Childress said.

For instance, he noted he and some other members of his church have been "able to have some frank conversations" about delicate subjects with some members of an African-American church in their town. But that's because Austin Heights has built a relationship with that congregation over 30 years, conducting Vacation Bible School together and developing friendships, he added.

"Probably some of the biggest divisions in communities today are the divisions of class and economics. The only way to overcome those divisions is to be a congregation that actually works with people who are in poverty," Childress said. "Building relationships is key to overcoming barriers."

Unfortunately, many people consider themselves "too busy" to invest the necessary time to build the kind of relationships in which people deal with

tough and sometimes divisive issues, he noted.

"It takes time and patience," he said. "It's hard."

Jon Singletary, director of the [Center for Family and Community Ministries at Baylor University](#), agrees.

"Peacemaking is costly," he said. "It demands our life and our all."

Singletary gained firsthand experience in church-based community peacemaking while he was working on his doctorate in Richmond, Va.

"I was a member of a Baptist church there, but I was called by a Mennonite church, initially as a supply preacher. That developed into an interim position, and then I ended up as a Baptist in a Mennonite pastorate for four years," he recalled.

With the Mennonite's strong Anabaptist tradition of nonviolence, Singletary found himself leading a congregation ready to initiate peacemaking initiatives in its community.

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and the United States' military response—as well as a racial reconciliation emphasis already under way in Richmond—gave focus to the initiative, but it also included issues like family violence.

"We invited churches to enter into a citywide dialogue about these issues," he said. "We helped church leaders spend some time taking a look at these things, going back to the basis for shalom and what it means in our nation, the community and in families—its multiple expressions."

"Peace has to matter in the lives of individual Christians. We looked at what it means in our families and in our congregations. From there, we're able to look at its implications nationally and internationally, even when we disagree about its expressions."

Disagreements about the implications of peacemaking ironically can lead to conflict—particularly when people's primary identity is tied up in their national pride or political party, Childress observed.

The starting place for Christian discussion of issues related to peace should not be what any political leader of any party says, he added.

"The first place we start should be by asking what Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, says, and then work from there. The good news is that in the body of Christ, when we are committed to each other over the long haul and we share that commitment to Jesus, we don't have to solve it all today," Childress said.

Life-changing ministry often takes place over a long time—more often over cups of coffee and long conversations than a single sermon, he noted.

Creating a culture of peace in a church can't be rushed or coerced, Childress said.

"You can't force it. That's opposed to the very idea of building a people who are peaceable," he said.

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