Transforming Church Conflict

Compassionate Leadership in Action

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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?"[1] 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 charism 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[2] 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.[3]

College, university, and seminary professors have developed courses contextualized for particular subject areas.[4]

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."[5] 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.[6]

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.[7]

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).[8]

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.

Part 1

Basic Skills in Compassionate Communication

Chapter 1

By the Renewal of Your Mind

Transforming Church Conflict

> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.
>
> Romans 12:2

The key to transforming conflict in the church is developing skilled leaders who are not afraid to engage conflict. These leaders will trust the Spirit of God to renew their minds as they learn how to speak (and listen to) the truth in love. No longer conformed to the ways of the world, such leaders will understand the difference between conflict (which can be constructive) and violence (which is always destructive). Conflict allows for many points of view to be shared openly, for people to learn from one another's perspectives and to hear what matters most to them. Violence arises in situations where differences are denied and voices for change are silenced. Those who long for change, as well as those who are determined to preserve the status quo, become frustrated and begin to operate by the familiar cultural norms of a win/lose strategy. Seeking to win at all costs, each side sets about to defeat the other who, even in the church, may come to be seen as the enemy.

We are conformed to the world whenever we perceive conflict as a determined battle that we must win at all costs. When we hold enemy images of those with whom we disagree, we fuel polarization of persons and groups in our congregation. Widespread judgmentalism immerses the entire community in pain. As Franciscan priest Richard Rohr states, "pain that is not transformed is transferred."[1] It may be transferred to those around us through mutual blaming, or it may be internalized and

passed along to other persons in the system through our attitudes and unresolved grief. For pain to be transformed it must be acknowledged, brought into the light of day, and healed through the caring of the community.

This book is designed to nurture caring communities by teaching compassionate (or nonviolent) communication. Those who internalize the practical skills and the modes of awareness presented here will know how to lead their congregations toward constructive conflict, a dynamic process of creative change that promises to renew the church. When leaders engage conflict openly and skillfully, they give the community an opportunity to talk about, clarify, and live out their most deeply held values.[2] Those who long for change will learn ways to bring it about without alienating those who desire to preserve the status quo. And those who are happy with the way things are will genuinely open themselves to hearing from those members of the body with whom they disagree. Mutual respect and basic trust will be core values for all members as they remember that God wills communities of peace. In this way, church conflict will not be resolved as much as it will be transformed.[3]

What Is Nonviolent or Compassionate Communication?

In this first chapter we provide an overview of the essential conceptual framework of *nonviolent or compassionate communication* (NVC) that needs to be understood by church leaders aiming to lead their congregations *through* constructive conflict, transforming pain and alienation into joyful connection. Compassionate communication nurtures a kind of consciousness and teaches a set of skills that train people in a unique kind of practical wisdom. As a communication model, it helps us speak with clarity and passion as we learn to stay connected to what matters most to us. At the same time, it assists us in listening for what is in another's heart, especially when we find the other's words difficult or painful to hear. In the midst of conflict, it provides a reliable process of discernment that enables us to decide where to direct our energy as we make particular choices about how to engage those with whom we (perhaps strongly) disagree.

Compassionate communication teaches a way of being with ourselves and others that builds trust because it enables us to share what is in our hearts, without defensiveness, no matter how challenging. We are given the courage to speak honestly without fearing that we will alienate the other. We speak our truth with care as we try to imagine how our words may affect our hearers. When compassionate communication is practiced

faithfully over time, the congregation grows in trust that conflict can provide rich opportunities for deepening mutual understanding. Faithful practice of NVC also enables us to face our feelings of regret and guilt when we have not lived according to our own values. It offers concrete steps by which we can mourn choices that we regret and it sheds light on the process of making amends to those we have hurt. When we dare to act on our feelings of remorse, we gain inner strength because we are in alignment with our core value of integrity. Especially when relationships are bogged down with mutual recrimination and historical pain, compassionate communication offers a clear set of guidelines about how to work toward reconciliation. Whenever a single relationship improves, hope flares up with a sense of possibility for other relationships as well.

The overall purpose of compassionate communication is interpersonal connection. NVC assumes that a trustworthy connection between people is the precondition for finding *any* satisfactory way to transform conflict because it is the basis for any kind of cooperative human activity or fulfilling emotional relationship. In order to achieve mutual understanding and connection, NVC aims for three things: authentic connection with oneself; empathic reception of the other; and honest expression toward the other.

We aim first to connect authentically with ourselves so that we can speak honestly about our experience. Though we cannot control another person's reaction to our words, we aim to express ourselves in ways that minimize defensiveness and encourage receptivity. We also aim to hear the other with such a depth of understanding that she actually understands herself better after we have listened to her. In Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*, the ferryman Vasudeva embodies the kind of listening we aspire to.

> Of the ferryman's virtues, this was one of his greatest. He knew how to listen as few people do. Though Vasudeva spoke not a word himself, the speaker felt him receiving his words into himself, quietly, openly, unhurriedly, missing nothing, not jumping ahead through impatience, attributing neither praise nor blame—just listening. Siddhartha felt what happiness can come from opening to such a listener, having one's own life—one's seeking, one's suffering—enter this other's heart.[4]

As Vasudeva quietly steers his ferry through the water, his passengers find themselves opening their hearts to his receptive presence. His qualities of patience and quiet attentiveness provide the spaciousness that is

needed for the unburdening of their hearts. Because he attributes neither praise nor blame, his passengers do not fear judgment and so can speak freely.

Whenever we listen without praising or blaming, simply receiving what the other longs to say, we create the conditions for an emotional connection to be forged. Similarly, whenever we speak without judging the other, we increase the likelihood for a sturdier connection to grow between us. When we honestly communicate what we are observing, feeling, and needing in our particular circumstances, as well as make any requests we might have of the other (or ourselves), we typically find more freedom and ease in our interpersonal relationships.

The OFNR Template of Compassionate Communication

The four basic skills of the NVC template are: observation **(O)**, feeling **(F)**, need **(N)**, and request **(R)**.[5] While they can be cognitively grasped relatively easily, the more challenging task of truly internalizing them requires a commitment to ongoing practice. The third skill, identifying needs, is the conceptual linchpin of the whole. Learning how to connect with our own and others' needs is the key to transforming animosity or indifference into constructive, life-giving relationships. The OFNR template for learning compassionate communication is a useful tool for guiding our conversations, but it is not a formula for a particular way of speaking. It helps us to understand ourselves and others in the midst of difference and disagreement. In other words, there is no right or wrong way to speak in NVC. NVC helps us to speak authentically in our own idiom what is truly in our hearts.[6] We have found the template extremely useful, however, for learning each of the discrete skills. Once we internalize the template, we can communicate in compassionate and colloquial ways. Here we will briefly describe each of the four steps involved in a complete, compassionate communication, which will then be elaborated in subsequent chapters. Though these steps are by no means linear, they are presented in a step-by-step fashion for the sake of clarity.

Observations

Whenever we seek to communicate clearly with others it is helpful to let them know which of their words or actions are affecting us. Whenever we can describe what we are observing without at the same time evaluating it, connection is facilitated. Especially if we have a negative reaction to

another's words or behavior, it helps simply to describe it while remaining as free from any evaluative comment as possible. Negative judgments tend to evoke defensiveness. When we criticize or label others, we are therefore likely to contribute to disconnection.

Observations describe what is available to our senses: what we can see, hear, touch, taste, or smell. They are specific to time and context. If your colleague arrives for an appointment thirty minutes later than you expected, you might say, for example: "I'm puzzled because I expected you a half hour ago. I had written 2 p.m. in my calendar." Even to say, "You are late," is to make a kind of evaluation, rather than a simple observation because you don't actually *know* that she is late; all you know is that your calendar says that she was due to arrive at two. She may have a completely different understanding about the time you were to meet. The intention in making an observation is to share helpful information about what in particular you are reacting to, not to criticize or lay blame at the other's door. Separating an observation from any possible evaluation facilitates connection because it gives no offense.

In making an observation, the aim is to describe what you have seen or heard as if a video camera were recording the incident. If you say, for example, "Ellen procrastinates," you would be using a verb that has evaluative connotations. If you were to say instead, "Ellen told me that she had to leave for the airport in twenty minutes and that she hadn't yet started packing," you would be offering a precise observation devoid of evaluation. Generalizations are similarly avoided because they don't give a concrete description of a particular event. Thus we seek to avoid comments that use such words as *always*, *never*, *everyone*, or *nobody*, as in, "You are always late." We seek, as much as possible, to speak concretely about specific events and to see others without preconceptions.

Feelings

The second step in the NVC template is stating what we are feeling. We continually assess what is happening around us through our emotional capacities. In his book, *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman argues that we are capable of appraising situations with lightning speed. Laboratories can now measure the interval between a stimulus and our emotional response to it in the thousandths of a second.[7] Such speed, says Goleman, helped guarantee human survival when even a millisecond might make the difference between life and death. If a snarling dog lunges toward me, my intense fear will send hormones to my brain that will activate a

fight or flight response before I have time consciously to assess the dog's relative danger.

Besides acting as a kind of radar for danger, our emotions are also closely tied to our thoughts. Anyone who practices cognitive behavioral therapy or mindfulness meditation will know how intimately interwoven our emotional state is with our beliefs, judgments, and thoughts. Here it becomes apparent that many of our emotions are not triggered directly by a change in the environment, but rather by our rational assessment of that change. If you conclude that your congregation's accountant is embezzling church funds, you would likely feel angry. However, if you suddenly realize that you have misread his report, your feelings would likely change. No longer believing that he is stealing from your church, you would likely feel relieved. The emotions you have, in other words, depend on the cognitive assessment you make. Learning to take note of your intervening thoughts and connect them with your feelings is also a key skill in compassionate communication.

Needs

NVC not only acknowledges the integral connection between feelings and thoughts, it seeks deeper understanding by connecting feelings with needs. Assessing what we need is the third step in the NVC template. It is a basic presupposition of compassionate communication that we are trying to get our needs met in every moment. We are motivated to act, speak, keep silent, and move toward or away from someone on the basis of our needs. Virtually everything we do (or choose not to do) is an attempt to meet a need. Thus, our needs are the source of our underlying motivation. What are we fundamentally desiring, wanting, working toward, hoping for, or valuing at any particular moment in time? If our basic needs are met, we might feel contented, excited, relaxed, delighted, joyful, moved, or happy. If our basic needs are not being met, we might feel frustrated, angry, sad, discontented, bored, disappointed, or anxious. In the examples given above, the pertinent need in relation to the church accountant would likely be for trust. In order to work effectively with the accountant you need to trust him. Your initial feelings of anger as well as the subsequent relief are likely connected to the essential need for trust. The need I have regarding the snarling dog would be for safety. It is clearly my need to be safe that would spur me into action. The need regarding the appointment with your colleague might be for clarity or for consideration, depending on how you interpret the other's actions. If

you tell yourself that she is being inconsiderate of your time, it becomes clear that you need consideration. If, on the other hand, you are puzzled by the miscommunication, your main need probably would be for clarity.

In compassionate communication, needs by definition contribute to the flourishing of human life. Though they are often met in different ways in different cultures, human needs are universally shared. All people, no matter what their culture, have a need for food, water, clothing, warmth, and shelter. All human beings need rest. All persons have basic needs for safety, connection, community, support, respect, and understanding as well. People everywhere need love, hope, and meaning.

Knowledge of our own needs also enables us to understand what others might be experiencing when we seek empathically to grasp the essence of their experience. Knowing that others' feelings point to their underlying needs, the key skill lies in learning how to connect those feelings with needs. This can be challenging given that many people in our culture are not familiar with expressing either their feelings or their needs directly, sometimes having only a vague sense of discomfort or a strong judgment about how others are doing the "wrong" thing. Offering empathic understanding to others requires us to connect with what their need might possibly be. For example, if a member of your church describes her life in a way that evokes a feeling of loneliness, you might guess that her underlying need is for connection, intimacy, companionship, or community. You would get clues as to which need is most alive for her by noticing her concrete circumstances (in the observation). Feelings of loneliness that surface the day after her dog has died would be different from the loneliness she might feel living in a foreign country where nothing is familiar and her loved ones are a continent away. The quality of a new widow's loneliness would be different from the loneliness of someone in an unhappy marriage, though both of them may long for intimacy. So, even though the feeling of loneliness would be present in each circumstance, the underlying need is always context-dependent. Needs, in other words, are interpreted within a specific context. Observations that are context-specific therefore help us to connect the feelings we hear with the possible underlying needs. Thus, each component of the OFNR template is deeply interrelated to every other part.

In situations where we cannot find words that adequately describe what we are feeling and needing, we would do well to seek out friends or colleagues that have skill in empathy. We can request that they simply hear us, to listen to us with caring as they seek to understand our experience. We might ask them to guess at our feelings or needs by paying attention

to our words, tone of voice, body language, or overall context. Or we might request them simply to be present to us, listening in silence to all we have to say. What we need when we ask for empathy is not someone to solve our problems or even to make us feel differently, but rather to give us the opportunity to be heard by someone who cares about us.

Compassionate communication practice groups typically give us training not only in listening with empathy but also learning how to listen to ourselves empathically (self-empathy) as well as speaking honestly. These skill sets all build on an ability to identify and accurately name our feelings and needs. NVC books and workshops provide lists of feelings arranged in family clusters to encourage finely differentiated feelings such as irked, miffed, irritated, annoyed, angry, furious, irate, and livid (see Appendix 1: Feelings Inventory). They also provide lists of needs clustered in family groupings: needs having to do with personal autonomy or choice; an array of interdependent needs; needs for physical nurture and well-being; and basic needs for integrity, play, celebration, and spiritual communion[8] (see Appendix 2: Needs Inventory). In addition, a wide variety of methods have been devised in recent years to help people gain fluency in identifying both feelings and needs, including card games, NVC dance floors, an empathy labyrinth, creative journaling assignments, and interactive group activities.[9]

Requests

The process of finding a strategy to address the need is the fourth step in the OFNR template. Once we have clarity about what we need, we can make a request that we believe will contribute to its being met. Effective requests are time-specific and doable, what Rosenberg calls positive action language. It is important to ask specifically for what you want, *not* for what you don't want. Thus, you might say, "I'd like you to call me once a week" *not* "I don't want you to call me so often." The request also needs to be specific and doable: "Would you be willing to give me a hug right now?" *not* "I'd like you to be more affectionate."

Rosenberg comments that we should never agree to fulfill another's request unless we can do so "with the joy of a small child feeding a hungry duck."[10] In other words, requests are understood as gifts, not as demands. They give us an opportunity to contribute to another's life, itself a fundamental human need. If we say no to someone's request, it is likely because we are saying yes to some (perhaps unstated) need of our own and we cannot figure out a way to meet both needs at the same time.

Conversations around requests are thus opportunities to become more deeply aware of our own needs as well as those of the other as we try to find a strategy that will meet both sets of needs.

Compassionate communication jealously guards the freedom of each person's choices, valuing the autonomy of every human being (even while emphasizing our interdependence). Requests are quite different from demands. If the other responds to our no by blaming, coercing, ridiculing, or pleading with us, the request may have been a demand in actuality. Demands contribute to disconnection because the need for choice is universal. Anytime we agree to do something out of fear, shame, or coercion and not freely and gladly, we build up resentment. We may submit now, only to rebel later. There is little chance for joyful fellowship with someone who uses power to force us into doing something that we do not wish to do. Thus a commitment to eschew using demands to get one's own way is particularly important in situations of conflict, and especially in those situations where there is an uneven power differential (for example, between pastor and parishioner). If one is able to stay on a committed path of equally valuing all persons' needs, trust will be engendered.

Honesty and empathy are the cornerstones of connection: honesty about what is going on in ourselves, and empathy for others. If we are unable to identify others' underlying needs, we cannot hear them with empathy. If we stand in judgment of them, or diagnose or label them in some way, we will fail to make an empathic connection. Other obstacles to empathic connection include: language that denies choice, such as "you have to," "you must not," or "you should"; language that expresses demands such as "If you don't do this, I'll do that"; or language that seeks to induce guilt such as "If you don't do such and such, I'll feel so disappointed in you." Any time we make demands, we fail to acknowledge basic respect for the other person's power to make choices.

Using OFNR to Translate Hard-to-Hear Messages

When we value the needs of others as well as our own, we can use the four basic skills of compassionate communication (OFNR) to gain mutual understanding and to fulfill as many core needs as possible within our human limits. When we use these skills to listen empathically, we can translate criticism or judgment into feelings and needs. We hear critical messages in one of the following four ways:

1. First, we might hear the other as attacking or blaming us. If so, we might think we are justified in attacking them back. With this response, negative energy escalates. We may become intent on proving ourselves right and the other wrong. Or we might see others as deserving punishment for whatever we judge problematic about their behavior or attitude. This choice typically intensifies anger and perpetuates self-righteousness and moralistic thinking. It is also the baseline for situations that can devolve into violence.
2. The second option for hearing criticism is basically to agree with it and magnify our own faults, judging ourselves. With this choice, we proceed to criticize, blame, or otherwise shame ourselves for whatever it is that we have done (or chosen not to do). Our self-talk might sound like this: "I should have known better." "What an idiot I am; I can't believe I said that." "I'll never learn." With this kind of response to criticism, we set ourselves up for chronic stress, guilt, and shame. If it becomes a deeply entrenched pattern, it can lead to depression.
3. A third option is to translate the criticism that others are making into the feelings and needs they might be having. We do this by making empathic guesses, imaginatively placing ourselves in their shoes. "Are you upset because you'd like your needs to matter, too?" "Are you annoyed because you value consideration and respect?" "Are you frustrated because you are longing for more fun in your life?" This option seeks understanding of the other's critical message, not in terms of what you might have done wrong or failed to do, but in terms of what the other person might be feeling and needing.
4. The fourth way to hear a critical comment is by engaging in an inner process of self-empathy. Instead of saying to yourself, "I can't believe what an idiot I am!" you would have compassion for yourself. "When I hear that she was hurt by my comment, I feel really upset because I wanted to contribute to her understanding. I'd like some acknowledgment of my intention."

As we develop our ability to translate painful messages into feelings and needs, it is helpful to notice the kinds of messages that are particularly hard to hear. We then can practice translating those difficult messages into the underlying feelings and needs, whether our own or others'. For example your colleague, the senior pastor, might say to you, "You really ought to try to preach on more culturally relevant topics." This may be

painful to hear because you already feel discouraged about your preaching style. You might judge your colleague as rude or even tell yourself that he is intentionally trying to demean you. Alternatively, you might berate yourself, calling yourself a lousy, boring preacher (as if his comment were a confirmation of your worst opinions about yourself).

If you were to use your newfound NVC skills and guess at his feelings and needs in this situation, a different perspective would arise. In this case, you would try to imagine the feelings and needs that might prompt such a comment. Perhaps he is worried about your ability to connect with young adults in the congregation and is convinced that preaching about the latest trends in popular culture would be a good strategy for doing so. Perhaps you hear his words as an insult when he means them as an encouragement or even an expression of support. Of course, you don't actually know why he made the comment until you ask him. The best way to do so nondefensively would be either to make an empathic guess or to engage in honest expression. "John, are you worried about my connection to young adults in our church and want me to preach on topics that you think would be meaningful for them?" would be one possible empathic guess. Or instead of empathy you might offer honest expression (focusing on your feelings and needs rather than his): "You know, John, when you tell me that I ought to preach on more culturally relevant topics, I feel completely discouraged because I've been working so hard on improving my preaching. I guess I could use some acknowledgment for the efforts I have made."

If John's comment triggers your inner judgments, you may become even more disconnected from your true needs. For example, you might begin to tell yourself that he is right, that you should be a more engaging preacher. What feelings and needs might be hidden under that single word: *should*? Here you may need to spend some time in self-empathy, asking yourself: "Am I frustrated because I want more competence in my ability to preach? Am I upset because I'd like more self-acceptance with where I am? Am I discouraged because I'd like to contribute to the spiritual growth of our young adults?" In giving yourself empathy, you would grow to understand *from the inside* your own desire to connect meaningfully with your congregants in your preaching. You would not be submitting to or rebelling against either the senior pastor's judgment or your own. Your desire to change your preaching style would just be one strategy for competence, self-acceptance, or contribution, which you could choose to meet in other ways as well. If you are truly aware of this cluster of needs, it becomes much easier to find strategies to support the

changes that would help you to carry out your vocation in a more life-giving way. (Chapter 6 on self-empathy will explain this process of self-connection, while avoiding self-judgment, in more detail.)

Working through these four steps of compassionate communication may seem mechanical or awkward, especially at first. Yet, even at their most mechanistic, they have the potential to make us aware of our habitual dynamics. Using the OFNR template for developing our skills is similar to practicing scales at the piano. If we want to make music, we need daily practice. We have found that using these steps as a mental guide facilitates clarity and contributes to ease in learning. Even a little OFNR can go a long way. Just as a simple Italian phrasebook can find us a place to sleep, enable us to buy groceries, or navigate our way through an unfamiliar Italian city, so knowing these NVC basics has contributed to our lives in fundamental ways. This is so because NVC helps us become aware of our habitual ways of communicating and provides ready tools for change. By consciously working through each of the steps, we may become aware, for example, of how frequently we label or judge others, or how in certain situations we feel helpless and believe that we truly have no choice. Or we may see how often we express our feelings without any real awareness of what underlying needs they are connected to. Or we may realize that certain feeling words are not in our vocabulary because they are somehow linked with feelings of shame. For example, we don't allow ourselves to feel sad because we have been taught that it is shameful to express sadness. Long-standing, habitual patterns of interaction with ourselves and others become readily apparent.

Compassionate Communication as a Christian Spiritual Practice

Marshall Rosenberg describes NVC as a spiritual practice.[11] Jewish by heritage, he speaks of God as "Beloved Divine Energy" that is the basis for every human being's connection to life. NVC arose out of Rosenberg's expressed desire to manifest love by connecting with the "divine energy" in himself and others. He writes:

> If we get in touch with each other's Divine Energy, it's inevitable that we will enjoy giving and we'll give back to life. I've been through such ugly stuff with people that I don't get worried about

> it anymore, it's inevitable. If we get that quality of connection, we'll like where it gets us.
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> It amazes me how effective it is. I could tell you similar examples between the extremist Israelis, both politically and religiously, and the same on the Palestinian side, and between the Hutus and the Tutsis. . . . With all of them it amazes me how easy it is to bring about this reconciliation and healing. Once again, all we have to do is get both sides connected to the other person's needs. To me the needs are the quickest, closest way to getting in connection with that Divine Energy. Everyone has the same needs. The needs come because we're alive.[12]

The central purpose of NVC, according to Rosenberg, is to connect with oneself, other human beings, and the divine. NVC provides tools to increase awareness of one's own and others' needs as well as skill in speaking about them. Its purpose, in other words, is not to get one's needs met but rather compassionate connection with oneself and others. Once we connect with others' needs in an open-hearted way, our common humanity becomes the fundamental point of connection. Even if we don't agree with their point of view, we can understand and acknowledge their heart's longing.

When we put NVC into an explicitly Christian context, we understand the joyful mutual giving and receiving that Rosenberg describes as central to NVC as descriptive not only of our being created in the image of God but also of our being redeemed for life together. God created us to live in rich fellowship with each other, and this richness of harmony and love will be made manifest in the kingdom of God. Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian of the twentieth century, asks "What does it mean to be human?"[13] He argues that we cannot fully understand what it means to be human simply by looking at ourselves and our own experience. The only one who perfectly reveals the nature of true humanity is Jesus Christ because he is the only one without sin. In other words, Jesus Christ not only reveals true God to us but also true humanity. He shows us what our created existence was meant to be: a human being for and with others[14] because self-giving love marks his entire life. In the cross of Jesus Christ, God is *for us* as savior and *with us* as fellow sufferer. Although our suffering cannot redeem others in the way that Christ's suffering can (for we are not one another's saviors), we can be fully with one another in compassion and tenderness. We can share the other's pain and help bear the other's burdens: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those

who weep" (Rom. 12:15); "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). By sharing in one another's lives in this way, we live out the human interconnectedness for which we were created.

The basic form of humanity is what Barth calls *Mitmenschlichkeit*, translated into English as "being-in-encounter." This means that we are only fully human in relation to others. Only as we live in community do we reflect the image of God who in God's Trinitarian identity is a union and communion of love and freedom. The biblical witness shows that human beings are created to live in fellowship with one another. "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18). As Ray Anderson puts it, "The picture of the solitary Adam in Genesis 2 is one of self-alienation rather than self-fulfillment. . . . The divine image is not a religious quality of the individual person, but a spiritual reality expressed through the interchange of persons in relation."[15] To be made in the image of God is to be made for glad fellowship with God and other human beings. Adam is not fully human until he has found his counterpart in Eve. Only then does he exclaim joyfully: "This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23). Though our capacity to be in perfect communion with God, each other, and the rest of creation has been marred by sin, the image of God in us has not been completely eradicated.[16]

Our human interdependence (or "being in encounter") with one another, according to Barth, consists in mutual seeing, hearing, speaking, and assisting one another with gladness. The four basic skills of the NVC template—observing without evaluating, stating feelings vulnerably and openly, connecting feelings to underlying needs, and making clear requests—provide concrete guidance for us as we seek to live in this kind of encounter. Barth's four marks of our basic humanity can fruitfully be correlated with observations, feelings, needs, and requests:

1. Mutual Seeing: The first mark of our humanity, according to Barth, is that of mutual seeing. When we look another person in the eye, we also consent to being seen by the other. Others cannot know us unless we consent to making ourselves known. They may be able to surmise something about us, but if we want to be fully human, we need to reveal ourselves to them. Barth writes, "This two-sided openness is the first element of humanity. Where it lacks, and to the extent that it lacks, humanity does not occur. To the extent that we withhold and conceal ourselves, and therefore do not move to know others and to let ourselves be known by them, our existence is inhuman." In so far as we seek to know and be

known by another, we create a bridge, a way of connecting with him or her. "I should not take him seriously as a human being if I did not seriously try to find the way from me to him."[17] To see the other truly, we need to set aside our own preoccupations, biases, and prejudices. ***Observations:*** This mark of our humanity corresponds to NVC's first skill. Here we aim simply to see the other without any judgments that would obscure their God-given humanity.

2. Mutual Speaking and Hearing: In order to be known by others, we must risk revealing who we are by speaking to them. In addition, we must listen with care to their own self-revelation. They interpret who they are by addressing us in our particularity. As Barth says, "Each fellow human being is a whole world, and the request which he makes of me is not merely that I should know this or that about him, but the person himself, and therefore this whole world." Barth comments trenchantly that "two monologues do not constitute a dialogue,"[18] thereby reminding us how "barbaric and inhuman" our speech can become when we are not truly seeking to connect with the other but are concerned only with ourselves. ***Feelings and Needs:*** NVC provides clear guidelines about how to let others know us by identifying as best we can what we are feeling and needing. It also helps us to listen to the heart of the other's message. In the midst of all that others say, we listen intently for the crucial information about how they are feeling as they connect with their underlying needs and values. When we listen in this way, it shows our willingness not only to be known in our vulnerability but also to hear others with respect and care for their vulnerability.

3. Mutual Assistance: This mark of our humanity recognizes our fundamental need of one another. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'" (1 Cor. 12:21). No human being is self-sufficient. All human beings need the assistance of others from cradle to grave. Though only God can offer saving help, we can offer penultimate help by sharing our burdens with one another, by offering each other comfort, encouragement, companionship, and support. We can pray for one another and uphold each other in love. Barth underlines the centrality of mutual need as a basic mark of our humanity: "My humanity depends upon the fact that I am always aware, and my action is determined by the awareness, that I need the assistance of others as a fish needs water." He also reverses it, saying, "My humanity depends upon the fact that I am always aware, and my action is determined by the awareness, that I need to give my assistance to others as a fish needs water."[19] Thus mutuality and reciprocity in both offering

and receiving help is an essential mark of what it means to be human.
Requests: The four basic skills in compassionate communication provide a concrete means for offering and receiving mutual assistance. It involves expressing honestly what our needs are and crafting requests to others on the basis of those needs. We also listen to others with requests in mind. Making requests potentially unleashes our creativity. At the same time, it is a step where people frequently experience conflict. A strategy that meets my need for intimacy might not meet your need for autonomy, for example. Though those needs do not inherently conflict, it calls for creativity to find a strategy that will meet both sets of needs. When we cannot find a way to meet both sets of needs, we have to acknowledge our failure of imagination and actively mourn our limitations.
4. With gladness: The fourth mark of our humanity, according to Barth, is that we see and are seen gladly, we speak and hear one another gladly, and we offer mutual assistance to one another with gladness.

> What we indicate in this way is really the *secret* of humanity. . . . in doing so we presuppose as the living center of the whole the decisive point that they meet gladly and in freedom. . . . there is a discovery, the mutual recognition that each is essential to the other. . . . [There is] an active willing of this fellowship, a willing which derives quite simply from the fact that each has received a gift which he necessarily desires to reciprocate to the best of his ability. And if it is asked in what this gift consists, the answer must be that the one has quite simply been given the other, and that what he for his part has to give is again himself.[20]

Our encounter with one another is thus a matter of mutual joy in which we receive one another as a gift. According to Barth, only in gratitude and freedom can our encounter with each other truly be human. Only in relationship with others do we discover our own "uniqueness and irreplaceability."[21]

Barth's "gladly" and "in freedom" resonate with Rosenberg's admonition to meet requests only when one can do so in pure gladness of heart. To be human for Rosenberg is to live in life-giving connection to one another and our own selves; to delight in contributing to the well-being of others; to recognize the essential "gift" of our interactions with others.

> To give a gift of one's self is a manifestation of love. It is when you reveal yourself nakedly and honestly, at any given moment, for no

> other purpose than as a gift of what's alive in you. Not to blame, criticize, or punish. Just "Here I am, and here is what I would like." This is my vulnerability at this moment. To me, that is a way of manifesting love.
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> And the other way we give of ourselves is through how we receive another person's message. To receive it empathically, connecting with what's alive in them, making no judgment. Just to hear what is alive in the other person and what they would like. So Nonviolent Communication is just a manifestation of what I understand love to be.[22]

Both Christian theology and NVC recognize the importance of honoring the freedom of each person's choices and understanding the gift character of our life together. When we respond to others out of a sense of obligation or try to motivate ourselves or others by guilt or demands, we are disconnected from the life-giving values that truly motivate us.

Conclusion

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight" (Prov. 9:10). Any wisdom that we find is therefore subsequent to the fear of God. Here fear means awe and reverence for God and respect and honor for all that God has made. Fearing God means that we seek to live our lives in accordance with God's life-giving will. As we lead congregations we seek that will through prayer, discernment, and constant attention to the Spirit of God as it moves in our lives, both individual and corporate. It means we study Scripture to hear what God may be saying to us through the Bible. NVC gives us tools for discernment and listening to God as well as to our own hearts and the hearts of those with whom we live.

Compassionate leadership, which has the potential to transform conflict, respects the creatureliness of human beings. Compassionate leaders see others in their full humanity: as made for life in community. Whenever we address one another with openness and respect in the church, we honor our humanity. Whenever we acknowledge our mutual need of one another, we honor our humanity. Whenever we listen to others with compassion and love, we honor our humanity. Whenever we support the freedom of each individual to take responsibility for his or her thoughts,

feelings, and actions, we honor our humanity. NVC supports compassionate leadership by helping us to honor human beings as God's beloved children, creatures made to live in loving fellowship with God and each other. As we will see in the next chapter, connecting with others' needs is precisely what enables us to see their humanity. Once we recognize others' longings as the same longings of our own hearts, we can encounter them with mutual respect, openness, care, and freedom—the very qualities of life we seek in the kingdom of God.