

MAINTAINING CHURCH UNITY IN A COMPLEX WORLD

PART A - STRETCHED TO BREAKING POINT

<u>Disunity flashpoint</u>	<u>Triage the issue</u> (right/wrong; wise/unwise; like/dislike)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - music choices for services - how to practice communion - church members' political views - women's role in the church - how spiritual gifts are practised in church - church catering - church ventilation and/or safety - internal eldership disagreement about the appointment of a future elder - church building modifications - one church leader makes a unilateral, rogue decision - internal power struggle within a church ministry team - one church leader expresses controversial theological views - the perceived mishandling of a church discipline case - children's ministry provision - another? 	
<p>Select one example that you have witnessed recently <i>Share with your neighbour the factors that make maintaining unity hard in this area</i></p>	

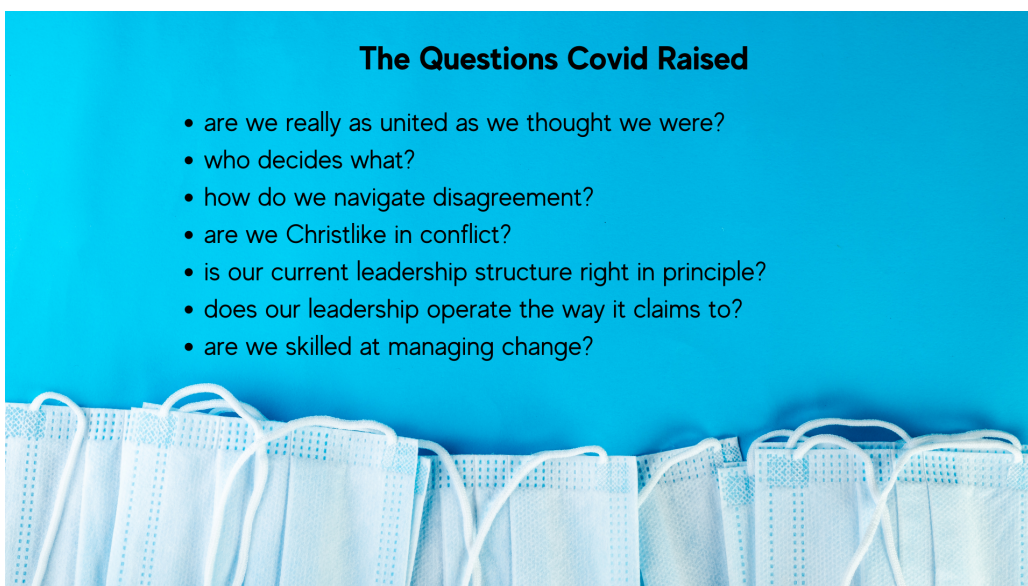
Disunity: The Oldest Of Problems

- from one angle: the problem the gospel solves (from Babel → the gathered multitude)
- the God of perfect union is reuniting all things under Christ (Ephesians 1:9-10)
- that unification hasn't fully arrived (eg. Acts 6:1, 15:39, 1 Corinthians 1:12, Phillipians 4:2, James 4:1)
- the church is called to maintain *practically* what it already is *spiritually* and this is a witness to the world (Ephesians 4:3, 1 Corinthians 12:13, John 13:35, John 17:20-23)

Major implication: Church unity is not a diversion from God's purposes and is about more than having a quiet life! It is vital to both God and mission. Working for unity is a worthy time-investment.

Maintaining Unity: Contemporary Complexity

- depraved hearts + differing viewpoints are perpetual!
- less homogeneity in the church than ever
(greater mobility /denominational criss-cross; more 'voices' being heard)
- then throw a pandemic into the mix!



The Questions Covid Raised

- are we really as united as we thought we were?
- who decides what?
- how do we navigate disagreement?
- are we Christlike in conflict?
- is our current leadership structure right in principle?
- does our leadership operate the way it claims to?
- are we skilled at managing change?

PART B - HOLDING IT ALL TOGETHER (With God's Almighty Help!)

Three key players in church unity: **the main leader, the plurality, the membership.**

1. The main leader**a) examining our hearts**

- responsibility or ownership?
- humility or pride?
(defensiveness and listening are test cases)
- godly expressions of emotion or ungodly?

b) custodian of unity

- promoting a culture of care and trust
- working hard to 'level the playing field' (the main leader = the most power)¹
- being willing to lose some battles (put mutual submission into practice)

c) triaging issues

Exercise: Take 5 minutes to triage the issues on page 1 of this handout. Which of the following categories does each issue fit into most?

- *right/wrong*
- *wise / unwise*
- *like/dislike*

NB: Church leaders need to upskill in areas that we don't always think are key (ie. some leaders probably need to read more books about leadership and heart change than they are doing)

¹ Practical suggestions: Let another leader chair meetings. Don't speak out on every issue. Let others lead in their areas without constant interruption. Openly ask others in meetings 'what they think' and show that you value other perspectives.

2. The plurality

a) why we need it

- God has built plurality into local church structure for our humility and accountability²

“God chose this method of church governance because, to work well, plurality requires what God values. Humility, contrition, word-trembling leadership – these are the kind of leaders to whom God looks. It’s no surprise to discover that these are also the values he requires for an effective plurality. God values both the ends and the means. He not only wants the mission to be accomplished, but God wants to see churches that flourish and last.”³

Reflection Question: What might be other reasons why God built plurality into the DNA of the local church?

b) fake plurality vs genuine plurality

Fake plurality	True plurality
Main leader can’t lose a ‘vote’ among leaders	Main leader can lose a ‘vote’ among leaders ⁴
Other leaders don’t speak up to shape the discussion	Other leaders do speak up
Main leader never gets followed in their vision	Main leader often gets followed in their vision but with accountability, feedback and support
Most important decisions are decided by main leader or sub-set of the whole leadership group (ie. ‘the meeting before the meeting’)	Most important decisions are decided by whole leadership group

² Acts 14:23, Acts 15:6, Acts 20:28, Phil 1:1, 1 Tim 4:14, 1 Tim 5:17, Titus 1:5, 1 Peter 5:1-2, 1 Peter 5:5.

³ Dave Harvey - www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-best-church-leader-is-a-team. Read also Dave Harvey “The Plurality Principle” for a biblical defence of plurality and an exploration of “first among equals.”

⁴ The pastor(s) worthy of double honour have no ‘headship’ over the eldership.

c) making plurality work

- understanding group dynamics
 - the effects of size and staff
 - in larger teams: delegate decisions to smaller teams when possible
 - a “group personality” forms over time but can be disrupted by adding or subtracting

- coping with diversity and conflict
 - group opposites need to understand that each ‘voice’ in the group adds value; we should thank God for our opposite voice⁵
 - wrong responses to conflict = being a peacefaker (avoid) or a peacebreaker (attack); we must learn to be peacemakers⁶
 - talking *about* our character as leaders outside conflict situations is helpful⁷

- the role of staff
 - often initiators of vision and completers of detail
 - if elders are among paid staff: slowing down to hear others (eg. other elders who aren’t as up to speed and hearing from women)

Sidenote on “power”

- Marcus Honeysett’s book “*Powerful Leaders*” is important reading
- power can exist at any level in church life (but leaders should be especially self aware)
- beware the *slippery slope* from *legitimate* to *illegitimate* uses of power, and from *transparent* to *non-transparent* uses
- “what safeguards would be strong enough to keep you from your worst self?”
- suggested reading: *Audit of Abuse of Power*
www.spckpublishing.co.uk/pub/media/PDFs/Powerful_Leaders_Digital_Resource_Final.pdf

⁵ Suggested reading: *The 5 Voices* by Jeremie Kubicek.

⁶ This terminology comes from *Resolving Everyday Conflict* by Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson.

⁷ Our eldership team read through and reflected upon the book *Lead* by Paul Tripp.

3. The church member

a) not always leading but always being listened to

(does your church do 'grass roots' initiatives or do ideas always descend from above?)

b) being led through change carefully



Navigating change

- neither too fast or too slow
- normally plenty of pre-warning
- carefully listening to opponents
- presenting persuasively but respectfully
- no unanimity among leaders can be an advantage

c) empowering individuals to lead under a framework

- Acts 6 in action: empower, don't just delegate⁸
- setting principles, not micromanaging
(eg. a worship leader with a degree of autonomy but working to a set of elder agreed principles)

⁸ This insight comes from Ray Evans in *Ready, Steady, Grow*.

Scenario

A new children's worker arrives in a church and is quickly concerned at the piecemeal and sometimes substandard material being used for Sunday School teaching.

The worker would like to introduce a unified curriculum but suspects there might be some resistance from several teachers who will want to continue doing their own thing.

- 1) What steps might the youth worker take?
- 2) What missteps do they need to avoid?
- 3) Must this change be made at all costs? What tier of issue is it?
- 4) How might unity be promoted?

Recommended Resources

The leader's character

Leaders Who Follow - Andy Mason

Lead - Paul Tripp

The Heart Of Anger - Steve Midgley and Christopher Ash

How Do Churches End Up With Domineering Bullies For Pastors? - Sam Alberry

www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/domineering-bullies-pastors/

Powerful Leaders - Marcus Honeysett

Audit Of Abuse Of Power - Marcus Honeysett

www.spckpublishing.co.uk/pub/media/PDFs/Powerful_Leaders_Digital_Resource_Final.pdf

Leading well

The Plurality Principle - Dave Harvey

Wisdom In Leadership - Craig Hamilton

Leading In Complexity Webinar - Jen Charteris (FIEC YouTube channel)

Resolving Everyday Conflict - Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson

Ready, Steady, Grow - Ray Evans

Biblical Eldership - Alexander Strauch