



## **When Church People Swarm** **By Margaret Marcuson**

As a young seminarian, I was surprised to find myself caught in the crossfire of a major church conflict. I was the focus of it. Some in that congregation didn't believe women should be allowed to preach. I remember sitting on the couch of one of the church leaders while he stood with his New Testament open, telling me why I was wrong; in all honesty, however, I have to admit I had gone to his house to tell *him* why *he* was wrong. In ministry, we can be blindsided by a conflict coming out of the woodwork. The intensity escalates surprisingly quickly, and people we thought we knew behave in ways we never expected.

Exodus 10 describes the plague of locusts in Egypt. Locusts are a scourge to this day, and scientists are just learning what causes them to swarm. These usually quiet, solitary, inconspicuous insects crowd together after a population increase. Rubbing their legs together causes the insects to transform – they change color and behavior, flying by day rather than night, swarming together, and devastating crops. Likewise, church people (including clergy), under certain circumstances, begin to crowd together emotionally and act in ways that can be destructive to congregational life. When anxiety is high, people often function reactively rather than thoughtfully. While scientists don't yet know how to short-circuit the locusts' swarming, there are things that leaders can do when church people begin to "swarm."

Heightened anxiety in the congregation or denomination is a major factor in church conflict. The conflict I was caught up in as a seminarian happened right after two beloved pastors left. Another church I pastored had a story of a past conflict about carpet color. The story never made sense to me, because they didn't fight about small things like that. But I later learned this fight happened right after a beloved pastor left. Other changes in congregational life can cause heightened anxiety – key staff changes (including the church secretary), a pastor's sabbatical, or building changes. We are also affected by what is going on in the larger society. For example, I know of one congregation that decided to lay off a key staff member just two days after September 11, 2001.

United Methodist District Superintendent Joey Olson observes, "When anxiety is high, at the outset, a congregation's coping skills go down." She has noticed what Edwin Friedman called the "herding mentality," people anxiously gathering together with others of like mind, and the tendency not to want to take responsibility. The Rev. Kate Harvey, executive director of the American Baptist Ministers council, suggests that blogging and other online tools make it easier for anxious people to swarm, and cause more damage.



What's a leader to do? In helping congregational leaders with their challenges, I've observed some ways leaders can respond when conflicts pop up (even intense ones). Here are some tips for managing when it seems as if the locusts are swarming:

**Keep your head.** Manage your emotions, to the degree that you are able. Self-regulation is a key part of leadership. When you sense yourself getting hooked, take a deep breath, step back physically, or find some way to continue the conversation later. No one will get this right all the time, especially when things are intense. Find someone to help you process what is going on, especially someone who can ask good questions and not just take your side. Joey Olson has invested a lot of energy working with her own family issues, recognizing that the family patterns we grew up with will affect how we function when anxiety is high, whether we want to "cut and run" or "put up our dukes," or something in between.

**Define yourself.** Focus on your own thoughts about the issue at hand, and say what you think, clearly and calmly. This is not the same thing as trying to convince others you are right – which rarely works when anxiety is high. One of my mentors, the Rev. Larry Matthews, says, "That's just how I see it." Say "I" more often than "you" or "we." A self-defined leader can help others calm down. Just as anxiety is contagious, so is calm. The moderator in the conflict I experienced as a seminarian was a mild-mannered man; yet he was calm and clear about his position, which helped me and everyone in the church.

**Remember the big picture.** Ask yourself questions such as, why now? What is going on in the congregation or community or society that might have people's anxiety up? Has this congregation faced challenges in this area before? As you step back, you will find yourself more neutral and better able to function. Do your best not to take things personally, even when they are framed personally. Avoid labeling people as "antagonists"; remember they are symptomatic of something bigger, which may have been repeating for generations. Perhaps thinking of them as "the loyal opposition" may help you stay a little looser and less defensive.

Conflict sometimes can't be avoided, particularly in times of change or transition. But it can be either transformative or destructive – depending on whether anxious impulses or healthy ones prevail. A better outcome for the whole congregation is more likely if we keep our head, define ourselves, and remember the big picture.

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