
Client Story: Faith Community Mediation

The Challenge

Faith communities are much like other organizations focused on accomplishing a mission, but they differ in one very important way. Because they are FAITH communities, they think they shouldn't experience conflict. When conflicts arise, they are more disruptive to the community.

At a large, diverse faith community we will call St. Andrews, when there was a major clash between elders in the community and the community leader, all hell broke loose. Shouting members disrupted services; the leader reacted defensively and in retaliation expelled several members. The community itself was divided between those on the side of dissident members and those supporting the leader.

The Solution

After a referral from another leader in the same denomination, the faith community's council contacted The Reid Group. They recognized that they needed a neutral, independent facilitator and they were united in their commitment to do whatever was necessary as quickly as possible to heal the community's wounds.

The Reid Group's distinctive approach is rooted in our mission: to help leaders and organizations transform challenges into opportunities to create a better world. In this case, the challenges were myriad and a better world meant having a healing, healthy faith community. Our approach is both personal and issue-oriented, involving the engagement of as many people as possible through individual interviews, focus groups, prayer and multiple "town hall" meetings.

The Process

Step One

The Reid Group consultant sought the viewpoint of the council, the community members and the conflicting parties through a series of one-on-one telephone conversations. These conversations focused on three questions:

1. What is the current reality in the community?
2. What are the challenges faced by the community?
3. What are your hopes and dreams for a successful outcome of this mediation?

Step Two

The consultant convened a meeting with a representative group of community members, each of whom was asked to invite one other person. At the meeting, the consultant introduced some critical ground rules for participants to follow in the discussion:

- Use “I” statements
- No blaming
- Focus on issues, not people
- Conflict with respect
- Keep confidentiality—do not identify the people present at the meeting outside the meeting

At the end of the meeting, the consultant presented a summary of what he had heard and observed as well as his suggestions for moving forward.

Step Three

The consultant brought the impacted parties (the community leader and the dissenting members) together with the council for a discussion focused on helping each person express hurt or confusion and identifying options for resolving the dispute.

A danger at this step is that either either of the conflicting parties could feel “ganged up on.” It is important for the consultant to keep before the group the goal of acting in the best interest of the whole community.

Step Four

The consultant convened a meeting of the entire faith community, and reiterated the ground rules for respectful discussion. He presented his proposal for resolving the disputes and invited the community to consider what they would need to move forward.

Step Five

The consultant reported to the council, outlining immediate and short-term steps to continue the community-building process.

Step Six

The consultant followed up with the impacted parties to hear any concerns they might have.

The Outcome

Bruises take time to heal. Through The Reid Group process, the community was confronted with the need to make a conscious choice to enter into a new season of life as a community. The expelled members were invited to return in good standing, with an agreement on how to address their concerns. The community leader promised to re-build trust with the council, the expelled members and the community at large through better listening, openness to ongoing coaching, being more present to relationships, and being more responsive to the needs of individuals and the whole community. The community participated in a ritual of new beginning during which everyone was invited to affirm the re-focus on the mission of the community and the guiding principles that unite them.