

GROWING Together

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STAYING GENEROUS WHEN CHRISTIANS DISAGREE

- *St. Jude's Church receives a large financial gift. Different visions emerge for how to use the funds.*
- *The town council plans to build a halfway house for recovering addicts within a block of Cherry Hill Gospel Hall. Long-time church members challenge the leadership team to take a stand. Team members discover they are evenly divided for and against the plans.*
- *The new pastor has arrived, and changes to the worship service are already ruffling feathers. Lack of communication causes annoyance and rumours abound.*

Each of these conflicts has the potential to develop into deadlock and resentment. But none of them is bound to. It depends on how much generosity of spirit the people involved can bring to the situation.

The New Testament urges Christians many times to be generous-hearted and patient. Ironically, it can be easier to be generous to people outside the church than to other Christians, who we feel 'really ought to know better'.

We are prone to black-and-white, either/or thinking. Those who do not agree with our prayerfully considered view must be wrong. We may put their error down to lack of information, lack of understanding, the pressure of circumstances or bad advice. Or we might suspect it is due to selfishness or malice. But not everyone who disagrees with us acts out of ignorance or self-interest. Sometimes compassionate Christians reach opposing conclusions. How can we go forward together in that situation?

We may not feel generous about the position, but it is always possible to be generous toward the person. After all, our opponent too is made in the image of God. It helps a lot if we can recognize that the person disagreeing with us is a person of integrity, someone who is also trying to follow Jesus Christ.

Generosity encourages us to find common ground. For example, 'pro-life' and 'pro-choice' activists have found it helpful to recognize their common ground in the desire for the wellness of women. In some places they have begun to work together, through education, to reduce instances of unplanned pregnancies and also to provide a full range of real alternatives for women who are unexpectedly pregnant. In the field of care for dying people, those who disagree about euthanasia and assisted suicide can find common ground in their desire that every person's last months of life should be meaningful, honoured and as far as possible free from pain. Both sides can agree on the rightness of developing excellent palliative care and making it widely available.

Generosity helps us to accept that we cannot change others. Sometimes no amount of reasoning, no fresh presentation of our point of view is going to result in their conversion to our opinion. But having done our best, we leave the matter in God's hands.

It takes integrity to face a big issue, to study, pray, consult and reach a conviction. It takes an extra layer of integrity to engage creatively with people who, through a similar process, have reached the opposite conviction. It requires the humility to recognize that in this age we only 'know in part and see in part' (1 Cor. 13), and the faith to believe that if we obey the gospel call to generosity of spirit, God will one day make sense of it all. The virtue of generosity does not belong to one side or another. It belongs to all of us as Christians, and finds its source in the extravagant generosity of God.



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