

## *Uncomfortable: The Awkward & Essential Challenge of Christian Community*

### *“Uncomfortable Community”*

#### [Ephesians 4:1-6](#)

In the beginning of our worship service today, we asked one another, “What is one thing that you really like about our church?” I am sure there were many different answers, but, perhaps, quite a number of us said, the “People.”

Yes, the people! That’s the word that I often hear from those who join our church. They would say, “The people in this church are friendly and welcoming.” One person who came to the new members class after worshipping with us for only one Sunday said, “I came to this church and realized all my friends were already here! So, why wouldn't I join the church?” It’s wonderful that, together, we leave such a positive impression on our visitors, and I hope and pray that we will continue to be a church of radical hospitality to everyone who chooses to worship with us.

Truly, as one of the songs in our hymnal says, “*The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people.*” However, we also know that the church can be an uncomfortable place for the very same reason. In his book, *Uncomfortable*, Brett McCracken lists “some weird church people” he has had the hardest time dealing with over the years. Here are some of them (pp. 123-124):

- The overaggressive huggers who always bypass side-hugging for the full-on-hug
- The under-aggressive people who never know whether to hug you or shake your hand
- The person who has shaken hands with you twelve times but still can’t remember your name
- The far-too-happy person whose perpetual smile surely must mask something sinister
- The church lady who manages to ask horribly offensive and personal questions under the guise of kind-hearted concern
- The guy who thinks every discussion among men must involve meat, beer, cigars, and/or *Every Man’s Battle*

Well, having been part of the church since birth and having served a number of different church as a pastor, I can create my own list of “some weird church people” who have annoyed me, and I am sure you can, too, if you have been in a church for a while. And, who knows, with my own faults and shortcomings, I probably show up on someone else’s list!

The truth about our church family is that, again, as the hymn says, “*We’re many kinds of people, with many kinds of faces, all colors and all ages, too, from all times and places.*” Our backgrounds, personalities, opinions, and preferences are all different. So, because of the differences we bring with us to our gathering, conflict is inevitable even in a healthy church.

In fact, conflict has been part of the community of Jesus' followers since its earliest years. The Bible tells us that even Jesus' disciples and the leaders of the first church were not immune to it. More than once, the disciples were in a dispute as to which of them was to be the greatest (Luke 9:46-47, 22:24). The apostles, Paul and Barnabas were in a sharp disagreement and ended up going their separate ways (Acts 15:36-41). The book of Acts and the letters written to the early churches reveal to us how much the early churches struggled with various conflicts that continued to rise up in their midst.

After all, conflict has never left the church but has continued throughout the last 2,000 years of church history. Conflicts both big and small have caused divisions within the church, resulted in the Reformation, birthing new denominations. They have even driven churches and Christians to wage war amongst each other! As we are aware, the United Methodist Church is currently in the midst of conflict. Having struggled for many years over the issue of human sexuality, we are now greatly concerned about the possibility of another denominational split.

This reality of the church as a people of many differences can make us feel quite uncomfortable. It is our human nature to want to be with people who share similarities to us rather than differences. From your own experiences, you know it's much easier to relate to someone who speaks your language and knows your culture. So, as McCracken writes, "church is more comfortable when you can do it among like-looking, like-minded, and like-everything people. They may not be better but homogenous churches are easier." (p.135)

Think about it. It would be much easier for you to stay at home or go out to fun places on Sundays rather than come spend a few hours in church, worshipping and mingling with other believers whom you otherwise do not hang out with. You know that I do not have to talk about other churches to make my point here.

We are a very diverse congregation. Some of us have been here in California for many generations, witnessing drastic changes in our neighborhood, while others have relocated from other parts of the nation. Some of us are first generation immigrants, while many others were born and raised in America. We are quite an international village, representing many different countries of Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, North and South America, the Caribbean and West Indies. Among our African members, there are several different ethnic groups and tribes. Though our common language is English, there are many different languages and dialects that we speak.

Many of us have different denominational church backgrounds, while some of us have been a life-long Methodist. Some of us are relatively new believers, while others were born to Christian parents. The oldest among us is 107 years young, and the youngest among us is not even 5 months old yet. Some of us are married, while some are single. We are straight people, and we are LGBTQIA persons. The list can go on and on.

This is incredible diversity within our congregation, and we are very proud of it, aren't we? Indeed, it is what makes our church beautiful and strong. And, to be the church God calls us to be here in Campbell and for the world, we must make every effort to become a church of even greater diversity. I invite our church family to ask these questions: "Who are those in our church who might be feeling unheard or undervalued?," "Who is invisible in our midst?," "Who is missing here?"

Yet, this diversity we celebrate as God's blessing can make our life together as a community of faith quite challenging. Sometimes, we find the beautiful differences among us becoming a stumbling block to our unity. Here is an example.

Our African members are predominantly first generation immigrants, and they have strong needs to connect with other immigrants. For them, the church is a place of community connection and support, and Sunday morning is not only a time of worship but a time for much needed fellowship. So, our African members exhibit a great sense of closeness amongst each other and a genuine support for one another. It is always very heartwarming to see how the whole community of African Fellowship comes together like a big extended family in times of need. However, this closeness among our African members can be perceived as being exclusive to people outside their fellowship. At the same time, our non-African members can be reluctant to approach our African members out of fear of making mistakes or offending anyone with their cultural insensitivity.

This can make us feel uncomfortable in our church. And, perhaps, there are some of you who have been feeling this discomfort more and more. Recently, someone made a comment about our church community: "This is not the church that I remember, and I sometimes feel uncomfortable, sitting in worship."

I am certain that Campbell United Methodist Church is no longer the church our long time members can remember. Indeed, our church has gone through many changes over the years, and more changes are on the way, as the world around us seems to never stop changing. And, with these changes, we will be faced with situations that continue to make us feel uncomfortable.

But, it is okay for a church to be an uncomfortable community. With our tendency to feel more comfortable with like-looking and like-minded people, it is natural for us to feel uncomfortable among people who are different from us.

In fact, this discomfort among believers was what the first Christian believers, the early churches were experiencing. Bringing Jews and Gentiles together for the gospel of Jesus Christ was not an easy thing to do. For Paul, unity in diversity was rather an unpopular message to preach. It went against what he had known. It went against his natural impulse. But, he did it anyway. Again and again, he went out of his comfort zone, crossing not only physical boundaries but also social and cultural ones as he spread the gospel throughout the diverse Roman Empire.

Let us hear his words again:

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

No matter our differences, we have all been called to one faith in Jesus Christ. We have one Lord. Each of the people here make up the body of Christ. And through the diversity of people the Spirit has drawn together in this church, we give witness to the type of embrace God has for the world. Because the good news is that God's salvation is not limited to people who look like us, who speak like us, who think like us, or who behave like us. God's grace is extended to all of us.

Because *We're many kinds of people, with many kinds of faces, all colors and all ages, too, from all times and places.*"

Let us remember that it is God who has called us together. For we are all one in Jesus Christ. It is Christ who sets us free from the law of sin and death. And just as God has embraced each and every one of us, exactly as we are, may we pass on the welcome we have received to those around us. May our church testify to the wonderful diversity of God's embrace. Especially in our increasingly divided and fractured world, may our church give a bold witness to the unity of the gospel message.

Thanks be to God! Amen.