

# THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Making Peace: A Guide to Overcoming Church Conflict**

by Jim Van Yperen  
(Moody Publishers, 2002)

*The following review, by a member of NPC, gives a glimpse of a book that is highly recommended to all in our congregation as we prepare to engage with Metanoia Ministries in a number of important activities in January 2008. NPC has engaged Jim Van Yperen and his Metanoia Ministries team to present a one-day seminar on Saturday, January 12 to educate the congregation on healthy ways to deal with conflict. NPC has also engaged Metanoia Ministries to survey present and past congregation members on their views about current life at National Presbyterian and to prepare a report on the findings. These initiatives are part of the Strategic Plan goal, "Building a healing and reconciling church." Van Yperen's book is available in the NPC bookstore, library, and satellite library.*

"Church conflict is always theological, never merely interpersonal."

"Efforts to restore and reconcile...without addressing the underlying systemic roots will always be inadequate."

With these two observations in the opening pages of *Making Peace*, church consultant Jim Van Yperen lays out two central assumptions of Metanoia Ministries' approach to helping churches with internal conflict. Van Yperen strives in his book to help people understand that conflict in churches is often complex and that this conflict is usually based on systemic roots, not just isolated problems. Van Yperen also believes that there are usually important theological issues implicit in church conflict concerning how people view their relations with one another and with God.

One of the points he tries to help both leaders and congregations understand is that conflict in a church is inevitable (p. 102). Such is the case, he asserts, because conflict normally flows from broken relationships, characteristic of the human condition because of our sinfulness (p. 98). Addressing the healing that is possible when conflict is addressed in healthy ways, Van Yperen comments that conflict provides an opportunity for people to mature if they approach the issues with humility, trusting in God for positive change (pp. 108-109).

As the layers of church conflict are uncovered, Van Yperen offers the insight that at the base are either cultural issues—usually the effort to harmonize Christian ideals with secular values—or an inappropriate focus on meeting individual needs. A focus on individual needs can be a problem, he observes, if fairness and tolerance take precedence over obedience and mutual submission (pp. 28-30). This holistic and nuanced approach to conflict, together with sensitivity to the theological aspect of church disagreements, is one of the strong qualities of Metanoia Ministries' approach.

A church's leadership is key in how conflict is managed, asserts Van Yperen (p. 25). He observes that the way leadership responds to conflict determines "if, how, and when the conflict is reconciled." He adds: "[I]f we gather in authentic community hungering and thirsting for righteousness, we have God's blessing and filling to grow through our differences (Mt 5: 43-46)." He continues by observing that "most church leaders have little or no practical training in biblical conflict resolution."

Van Yperen spends four chapters describing unhealthy ways churches often deal with conflict (pp. 111-162). He notes that people in churches may respond to conflict passively (keeping silent and spiritualizing passive behavior),

evasively (either concentrating on secondary rather than primary issues or simply ignoring the key issues), defensively (trying to manipulate people or claiming that a problem is just a difference in perception) or aggressively (trying to dominate others or initiating confrontation as a regular way of dealing with people with whom one disagrees).

In a redemptive church, argues Van Yperen, the congregation and its leaders need to follow Jesus' example and be humble, leadable, and teachable (pp. 186-191). They need to focus on articulating the truth in a loving way. This involves not being shy about proclaiming what is good, moral, and ethical (pp. 197-206). A healthy church confronts sin and engages in confession, forgiveness, and discipline (pp. 226-254). Van Yperen takes biblical advice about how people in their personal walk of faith should interact with God or their friends and applies it to a congregation as a whole. In this way he presents a challenging but important task to a church community for resolving its conflicts.

Van Yperen comments that *Making Peace* is a "why" rather than a "how to" book. However, his numerous examples of actual church conflict and his description of the common-sense, biblical ways Metanoia Ministries has guided congregations through such problems in the past are good models of practical ways to deal with conflict.

*Making Peace* is a worthwhile read for everyone in our congregation. It is recommended as preparation for the *Making Peace* seminar on January 12, and it will provide those unable to attend with an understanding of the content of the seminar.