Nurturing Safe Church Spaces

Bullying happens within larger social contexts which are made up of relationships among youth, volunteers, youth ministers, staff, and clergy, along with family and friends in the community. These relationships make up the culture of the church and the church's culture has an impact on the amount of bullying that happens.

Director of the film *Bully* Lee Hirsch says that preventing bullying requires that we do more than institute anti-bullying policies and punish bullies. "Combating bullying effectively is not about zero-tolerance policies but about changing hearts and minds."[1]

Cultivating a nurturing and safe church community for all members is the first step in combatting bullying and creating a safe space for people to worship God and be in fellowship with one another. The vows spoken by members of The United Methodist Church at each baptism read, "We will surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust of God and be found faithful in their service to others."[2] As people of faith, we are called to provide a safe and loving community in which children, youth, young adults, adults, and older adults can feel loved. This is how bullying can be prevented in the church.

In this excerpt from "Bullying: A Case Study in Ostracism," Richard Weissbourd, lecturer in education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, addresses the role that parents and the entire school community can play to create a safe, supportive school environment, "I think there's a lot of things schools can do to reduce the possibility of these things happening. …I feel like my kids went to school where … caring for other kids was woven into the fabric of classrooms. It was part of the way teachers organized classrooms."[3]

This thought about school culture also pertains to church culture. We as church leaders have a responsibility to create an environment where care and concern for others is woven into the fabric of our faith communities. Jesus taught that caring for the least of those in our midst is also caring for God.[4] The least of those in our churches are those who are ostracized, demeaned, and bullied both within the church and in the community.

A tool to use when trying to cultivate safe space and meaningful relationships is using something called relationship mapping. Starting the relationship map is done by answering questions about the relationships you have with people in your given context. For example:
Who in the church do you have a good relationship with? Who do you not have a good relationship with?
Who do others feel comfortable going to when problems arise?
Who are others drawn to?

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[1] Lee Hirsch interview, October 13, 2011.
[2] Taken from the Baptismal Covenant 1 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 35.

[3] Facing History and Ourselves "Bullying: A Case Study in Ostracism," ostracism.facinghistory.org/video/richard-weissbourd-what-schools-can-do.
[4] Matthew 25:40

Once a relationship map is done for the staff, or adults in a youth group setting, asking the congregation or youth group to do one for themselves and then comparing the two sets will give you a good idea as to whether or not bullying or ostracism is a problem at your church.

Even if these maps reveal that there is not a problem with bullying at your church, these types of activities will give you a sense of how people generally view those in positions of authority over the different programs in the church.

Below are some questions for further consideration as you move toward cultivating a nurturing church culture and preventing bullying:

1. Director of *Bully* says that "everyone has a place in the story." What does this mean? What has been your role with regards to bullying or its prevention in your church? What role would you like to play in the future?

2. If a forum on bullying were held in your church, who do you think would attend? What might the participants say about the culture of your church and community? Would it be well attended?

3. To what extent are difficult discussions about bullying an important part of addressing the problem? How do we engage in conversations about bullying that are often uncomfortable and emotional without making people feel defensive?

4. What priorities compete with nurturing a healthy culture in your church? What strategies can churches use to ensure that

focus on safe church culture is maintained? What are some of the little things that occur at your church that either help or hurt the church culture?

5. How would you characterize the culture in your church? What do you think needs to change? How does a church community go about making its culture more nurturing and safe?

6. Do the social norms in your church encourage people to stand up for others? What steps can a church take to change if this is not the case? What kind of commitment is necessary to make this happen?

7. What strategies does your church use to address bullying? Which strategies are most effective? Which are least effective? What do you do in your church to help combat bullying? What do you need to know more about in order to respond to or prevent bullying more effectively? In what areas do you need more support from peers, pastors, congregants, or staff members?

9. Individuals who are perceived as "different" are often singled out for bullying. Does the culture of your church promote the acceptance of individuals who have differences in the way that they look, behave, or socially interact? Are there changes that could help all be accepted and safe in your church? What can congregants do to make sure acceptance of difference is part of your church's culture?