

[Two to Tangle; Three to Win](#)

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COMMENTARY

## Two to Tangle; Three to Win

A congregation's "silent majority" is the key to friendly resolution of deadlocks

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The following article from the Conflict Resolution Center International, established by Christian Quakers, is an insightful and pragmatic analysis of problems faced in religious congregations and very applicable to the management of Hindu temples.

One of the greatest needs in conflict situations is to nurture the decision-making process. This becomes sorely tested because strong advocates for and against an issue are seldom willing to concern themselves with process. Those most able to do the nurturing are those least heard. This particular group consists of people who are less tied up in the outcome and are still struggling with their sense of what is true in the conflict situation. I call them the "Third Voice." They are likely to be the key to resolving conflict.

For example: After five years of turmoil, a small Jewish congregation nearly disintegrated. Meetings had broken down into harsh debates and contests between two factions. One group wanted the congregation to stay the way it always had been small, intimate, based on volunteer help. The other faction wanted a professional rabbi and Hebrew school. The congregation became ungovernable, and no one would run for office. They finally brought in a conflict resolution consultant who understood that a major part of the problem was that the strong advocates for and against these proposed changes had dominated congregational meetings. An important part of the congregation had been silent or silenced.

When a Friends (Quaker) meeting recently was locked in conflict, a member, Ruth Dymond, observed: "I believe people should come to a business meeting with strong convictions and that the expression of those views leads to a strong meeting. I think it is important to the process, and would help, if those who are neutral, as well as the clerk (chair of the meeting), make sure that all are heard. If this is not done, it leaves members not only feeling unheard and angry, but also we miss the joy and excitement of a decision made by true unity."

This was a spontaneous plea for Third Voice

participation. The role of Third Voice is not easy. One is likely to feel buffeted and indecisive when faced with the strong convictions of others. It is tempting to withdraw or to just wait and see. The key tasks of the Third Voice are to reach out to both sides, to ask questions, to listen, to keep the dialogue open in any way possible. This approach is vital because members of the vocal faction often feel isolated, lonely and estranged from the congregation. They feel that no one is interested in their views and that their perspectives are not heard or understood. Additionally, opponents lose their identity as individuals and become "them." The Third Voice can help to remind everybody that people have names; that they are still the persons we knew and loved before the conflict. By doing so they help to separate the problem from the person, and remind fellow members of the presence of the Divine Spirit. These activities help break through the paralysis caused by the strong positions and help open up communications. Without Third Voice involvement, the congregation will stay divided and polarized.

How did the consultant for the Jewish congregation involve the Third Voices? She organized a series of small, well-facilitated living-room meetings to discuss the future of the congregation. Every member was expected to and did attend one. The comfortable home environment, prayerful beginning and small size of the group created a less threatening atmosphere. That

encouraged the Third Voice members to participate. The consultant also conducted a written survey of each member's thoughts about the synagogue's future. This established a nonthreatening way for the less vocal members to express their views. Further, she monitored membership and board of director's meetings so they would encourage Third Voice participation. Their commitment to the continued existence of the congregation as a top priority led the members to find a win/win solution. They agreed to establish a religious school with limited funding, to expand the role of the cantor (liturgical singer) rather than hire a rabbi, and, most importantly, establish a reconciliation task force to assure that all voices would be heard in future meetings. This synagogue's attitude to conflict is now much healthier.

Ron Kraybill, a Mennonite conflict resolver, in an article entitled, *Conflict in Groups, The Cross Stitching Effect*, points out that, "What people expect in conflict happens. The key is member's attitude to conflict." He goes on to say that in a healthy congregation, "Members know that conflict is inevitable, even necessary to healthy group life. To disagree is evidence of caring and involvement. When issues arise, members move towards each other, not away, and they enjoy the vigorous exchange of views that follow."

The middle, or Third Voice, can help the congregation be unafraid of conflict and to welcome it as an opportunity. Any reconciliation process is a continual search for divine guidance. Out of that search will come creative and new ideas. Often with strong voices all around, and a sense of urgency to get a resolution, we lose faith. It is the job of the Third Voice to remind us to allow time and patience for the process to work.

In the long run, the Third Voice provides peace, stability and a sense of security for the congregation. They will keep the institution going. By their presence, they reassure people that, even though things seem in chaos, the congregation will survive. A solution will be found, and they are there for the long haul. They are also there to remind their fellow worshippers that a buried conflict destroys. A conflict resolved brings new depth and growth to the congregation as well as draws the group closer in love and friendship.

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