

## **Conflict Case Study:**

### **Sola Gratia**

*The following is a fictitious case study that introduces dynamics of leadership in a multicultural community. As you ponder the Sola Gratia scenario, are there dynamics that might be similar to ones in your ministry context? You might use the Sola Gratia story as an outline or format for developing a “case study” of your own congregation.*

Sola Gratia is a 65-year-old congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America located across from city hall in a small satellite city of a world-class metropolitan area. Founded just before WWII, Sola Gratia grew rapidly during the war years as civilian and military personnel flocked to and through this coastal city port with its ship-building industry. Among those who came in droves from the Midwest and other parts of the country were a considerable number of Lutherans. In Sola Gratia, they found a church that felt just like their congregation back home—traditional in liturgy celebrated in a stately brick church building with a fine organ, good choir, lots of Sunday School space and good facilities for fellowship and activities, including a gymnasium.

As Boomtown became Troubled City following the dismantling of the wartime economy, Sola Gratia’s community changed significantly, experiencing typical urban challenges of declining schools, deteriorating housing in some neighborhoods etc. In spite of some attempts to reach neighborhood newcomers (e.g., opening the gym for youth basketball evenings), Sola Gratia found itself unable to mirror the growing racial and ethnic diversity of its community.

During the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, Sola Gratia’s minister, Pastor Deep N. Placid, led the congregation in traditional ways. He and his wife were gracious hosts, often inviting congregational members and fellowship groups to their lovely home with a panoramic vista of the entire metropolitan area. While the congregational membership continued a slow decline, members were comforted by the steady hand and soothing basso-profundo pulpit voice of Pastor Placid.

In terms of the membership profile, apart from its growing failure to mirror Troubled City’s racial diversity, Sola Gratia did reflect its economic spectrum. From blue collar to managerial to professional folks, given its location in close proximity to a major university and Lutheran seminary, Sola Gratia’s membership also included professors and academic administrators. A prominent member, who over the years accepted many leadership roles in the congregation, was a central denominational figure, serving on its executive council and with numerous other high-level boards and committees.

In the mid-1980s, after a relatively brief interim ministry of 3-4 years following Pastor Placid’s retirement, the Rev. Sally Stride was called to serve Sola Gratia. Stride in she did! With a passion for outreach in the community, a flair for connecting especially with youth, and an angry edge against anything standing in the way of mission (including

sometimes synodical and national church leaders), Pastor Stride soon cast a vision of the “new” Sola Gratia. Through her own personal energy and relational style, Pr. Stride soon connected with Troubled City’s burgeoning population of Cambodian refugee families. The congregation helped resettle one refugee who was quickly identified as having leadership potential. Already Christian through the witness of his original sponsoring congregation in Minnesota, Lu K.V. was mentored by Pr. Stride and shortly enrolled in the local seminary’s alternate route to ordination (ARTOS) program. Before long, worship services were offered in the Cambodian language, led by Lu K.V. who translated Pastor Stride’s sermons for a while, and soon began crafting his own. While still including a remnant of children from the “old” families of the congregation, Sola Gratia’s Christian education classes soon became populated primarily by Cambodian children and youth. In one of her first continuing education experiences, Pr. Stride made an extended trip to Cambodia in order to better understand the cultural heritage of her new members, as well as to make connections with their families in the old country. Her visit was both practically and symbolically important.

Pastor Stride proposed that the bylaws be changed to ensure congregational council membership that would include half “new” and half “old” [case writer’s characterization, not Pr. Stride’s] members. She was also very savvy in seeking and obtaining grants from a variety of sources, including the national church and other regional ELCA congregations, to provide a stipend for “Pastor Lu” and in other ways financially undergird Sola Gratia’s outreach ministries. With a priority on outreach programs and staffing, Pastor Stride and the council reduced the budget for property maintenance; soon, beautiful old Sola Gratia began to look a little tattered around the edges.

As the congregation changed, some long-time members of Sola Gratia began to feel displaced or ignored. Among those whose offerings generated the bulk of the annual budget, there was complaining that the newcomer Cambodian (and some younger white families and individuals also) weren’t carrying their weight. A handful of the “old guard” lay leadership, while genuinely affirming Pr. Stride’s missionary zeal, were rather timid in their “sponsorship” of Sola Gratia’s new directions. They worried about how to sustain financially Sola Gratia’s ministry, particularly as older members with considerable resources moved away or died, and as outside funders’ priorities might change. Leaders emerging from among the “new” Sola Gratia contingent, enthusiastic about their church and fervent in their faith, were still newcomers to Lutheranism and to American culture. While in theory they had half the votes in decision-making, in practice their individual and collective voices remained muted in the governance of Sola Gratia.

Before long, Sola Gratia’s healthy tensions seemed to be giving way to heavy duty conflict, with some suggesting it’s time Sally Stride to ride out of town . . .