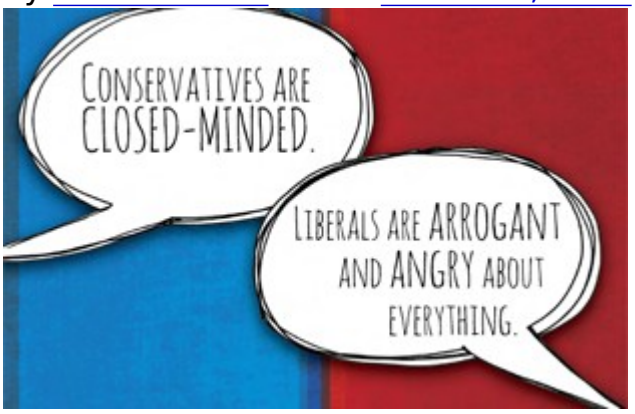
No longer strangers: Ministerial group bridges left-right divide

by Debra Bendis in the March 19, 2014 issue



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In 2009 the Richland County Ministerial Association was on the skids. Only six or eight pastors were showing up at the monthly meeting, a number that represented less than a third of the churches in this southwestern Wisconsin county. All but two of them were mainline pastors. Fifteen years earlier the evangelical pastors had split off and formed their own association. The culture wars were hot at the time, with Christians clashing over abortion laws, homosexuality, the inerrancy of scripture, gender roles, creationism, and politics.

One of the two conservative evangelicals who still attended the RCMA was Mike Breininger, pastor of the largest nondenominational church in the county. Liberals called Richland Center Fellowship “the flag-waving church.” RCF had a group that used flags in choreographed presentations and parades. For many years the church also performed a Passion play called *The Keys*, which drew some 40,000 people over the years. Breininger had been a wrestler at the University of Wisconsin, and he was known as a tough, no-nonsense leader. No one knew why he was still attending what most of his peers regarded as the liberal RCMA.

It wasn’t because he loved liberals or the RCMA. “My faithful attendance had nothing to do with a desire to see the association prosper,” said Breininger. “I was deeply concerned that the differences between the theological liberals and conservatives, and the ranting of those wanting everyone else to adopt their agenda, were a disgrace to the name of Christ. I didn’t want to lead the association. I wanted to

silence it.”

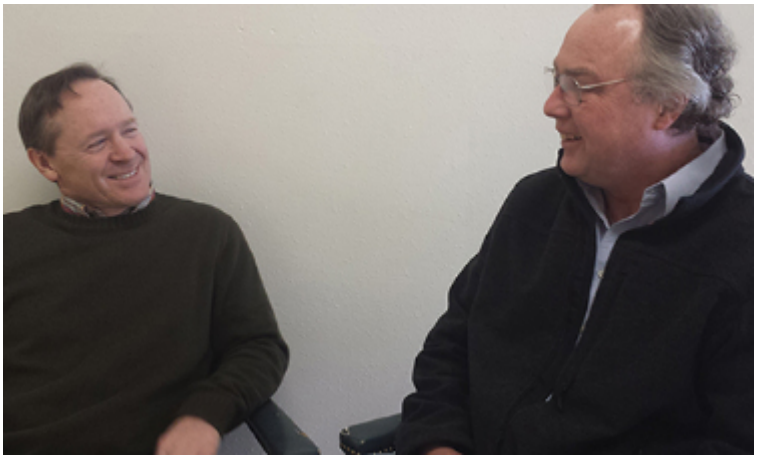
Another frustrated pastor in the RCMA was Larry Engel—a liberal. He attended only sporadically, complaining that the meetings often had “no agenda, no purpose, and no direction.”

Engel was pastor of Five Points Lutheran Church, part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He has been “on the left my whole life.” For Engel, raised in a Pittsburgh neighborhood where the steelworkers’ union was strong, ministry is linked to democratic organizing, liberation theology, and anything that empowers people. He has worked with the union movement, on organizing undocumented Mexican workers, and against the KKK.

But “I was an increasingly lonely liberal,” said Engel. He felt stuck in stereotypes and was feeling increasingly marginalized in public life. He was concerned that regardless of brand name, churches had lost public influence. “We had lost market share big time and were in a spiritual recession every bit as devastating as the latest economic recession and Hurricane Katrina.”

In his own act of resistance to the status quo, Engel decided to attend the 2009 National Day of Prayer gathering, which was sponsored by the Evangelical Association. The pastor who gave the opening prayer said, “Dear Lord, we pray for the conversion of all those non–born again pastors in this county.”

“He was talking about me,” Engel recalled. “I looked around the crowd and realized I was the only mainline Protestant in the crowd. I was not only lonely, but targeted.”



ACROSS THE AISLE: Mike Breininger (left) and Larry Engel have sought to bridge political and religious divisions. Photo by Alicia Breininger

On the other side of the divide, Breininger was charting his own way through the culture wars. “My image of the liberals was that they were arrogant and angry about nearly everything. They thought their agenda should be accepted by all and were willing to literally yell it at the ministerial association meetings, print it in the newspaper, or tell anyone who would listen. They were not my friends. They were people I had to stop from damaging the name of Christ in our community.”

Then everything changed—Breininger was elected president of the RCMA. He was stunned. “Why would they want me, the contrarian, to play the role of president? I found myself at a crossroads I never expected to face. How could I work for an organization that I loathed? I knew that the Spirit of God nudged me to be a builder and reconciler rather than a destroyer. But if there were to be any chance for something redemptive to come out of this adventure, I’d need a heart change and a new vision.”

Breininger decided to accept leadership and began by insisting that topics at monthly meetings be discussed in a respectful and timely fashion. He created agendas for the monthly meetings and tried to raise expectations. He drafted a paper titled “Pastoral Courtesies” that outlined ten rules of civil conversation.

“The pastors were warm to the ideas but not excited,” he said. “The heart of the association was on a slow curve of change—far too slow for me.”

Breininger, who calls himself the “consummate conservative evangelical,” decided that the only way things could really change was by him building relationships with people on the other side of the political and theological spectrum and finding some common passions. “I saw them only as the people who worked against what I believed in. If this new effort was going to get off the ground, I had to find some people from the mainline liberal ranks who thought there was virtue in trying to work together.”

Engel was impressed. He saw Breininger inviting evangelical pastors into the RCMA, broadening the base and changing the character of the discussion. He saw Breininger countering the mainliners’ anxiety with the evangelicals’ energy. The

decision to adopt “Pastoral Courtesies” brought both sides into agreement for the first time in years.

“I realized,” said Engel, “that Mike was serious about crossing the battlefield into new territory. He would get his hands dirty, work through the issues. I liked that a lot. He was a leader and a disciple, one who had integrity, humility, and a deep commitment to the gospel. I was beginning to feel less lonely and part of something purposeful, challenging, and Christlike.”

At the end of a meeting, Engel went up to Breininger and thanked him for running a productive meeting. Breininger was startled. All he knew about Engel was that he was regarded as a likable liberal, was pastor of a rural church, and taught at a Catholic college.

“I was surprised by the compliment,” said Breininger. “I don’t recall a liberal pastor ever complimenting me about anything. Maybe the liberals were more than just red-faced name callers who thought they needed to inform the evangelicals of their foolish antiquated views of the Bible.”

“Larry pressed me to get together with him and talk about future possibilities,” remembered Breininger. “At first I hesitated. Would the other evangelicals think I had sold out? Yes, evangelicals and liberals were both attending the association meetings, and we were getting along. There were 15 to 20 of us and sometimes more. There was an expectation when we met that God was doing something among us. But some feared that the old wars would resume.”

“As we began to spend time with each other,” recalled Engel, “I realized that the labels *conservative* and *right wing* were still there, but that *liberal* and *left wing* —words that I loved—were scorned by Mike as vehemently as the words I used for him. We were suspicious of each other, and at first the trust level was weak and tentative. On some issues—on homosexuality, inerrancy of scriptures, creation—we were each true to form. But on others—homelessness, churches working together, the kingdom of God, orphans and widows—we agreed. We intentionally worked on those issues while at the same time holding our ground on our differences. Trust and respect grew.”

One day Engel invited Breininger to attend an Industrial Areas Foundation training session in Madison. He supported the IAF’s process of holding relational meetings that identified common interests and brought out people’s values, allegiances, and

motives. He thought the training could help the two men craft a public relationship, one that would allow them to work together without leaving their traditions behind.

Breininger was skeptical. The IAF people were linked to the world of community organizing, a world that evangelicals generally did not appreciate. The IAF crowd included the kind of people who had shaped and helped elect Barack Obama; they were linked to the notorious community organizer Saul Alinsky. Breininger's instinct was to stay away. But he knew if he didn't try to cross some relational lines, there could never be progress toward cooperation.

But both Breininger and Engel were eager for change. They knew that the civic sector was in trouble and that mediating institutions—churches, families, schools, nonprofit organizations—were weakening and the social fabric unraveling. Their experience in Madison together might help build something. They decided to go.

"To my surprise," said Breininger, "I enjoyed the training. The IAF presenter Arnie Graf, a national leader, leaned liberal but talked a lot about reaching out beyond the left. I bombarded him with questions. Unlike many liberals, he did not get angry, red-faced, and start calling me names. He answered my questions and gave me a sense of possibility in the methods of the IAF."

During the ride home, Engel said to Breininger, "I learned some things from you today." The comment struck Breininger in an unexpected way. "He said he had learned from me? It made me wonder: Was I learning from him? From that point on I set my heart on learning from my friend, the liberal pastor."

Engel also remembers that ride home from Madison. "Man, did Mike and I ever have differences! Take unions, for example. I've been a farmworker organizer, and Mike's opposition got my dander up. We argued about that and immigration reform. Or maybe we wrestled. Regardless, I was being stretched, and my core beliefs were getting a workout."

The two began to talk about the community and discussed gathering community leaders together, with the churches leading the way, to build relationships that might produce cooperation and address community problems. They invited pastors, business leaders, and people from the social sector, law enforcement, the judicial system, public schools, county and city government, and health and human services agencies. These leaders came to the first Community Leaders Forum and kept coming. They didn't seem to mind that the churches were taking the lead role. In

fact, some seemed to think it was about time the churches got their act together and started working for the common good.

A few local projects began to change the work of the RCMA. One was a decision to redesign the traditional ecumenical Good Friday service. What had been a very traditional event with a declining turnout was moved from a mainline church to an evangelical church. The service featured a band, scenes from *The Keys*, and choreographed worship dances. The Free Methodist pastor had everyone place a stone at the foot of the cross. The stones symbolized sins and failures—and an unwillingness to work together. Ten pastors and 450 people attended.

The feedback was enthusiastic. Engel and Breininger heard comments such as “Why haven’t we done this before?” and “This cooperation is the work of the Holy Spirit” and “I’ve been praying for this.”

In 2011 these efforts at ministerial cooperation were challenged when Governor Scott Walker and his fellow Republicans, as part of a budget deal, all but eliminated collective bargaining for most public workers in the state and eroded the power of the unions. Act 10 made it harder for public unions to be formed by requiring 51 percent support from all workers eligible to be in the union, and not just from those who were voting.

Like the rest of the state, Richland County was split down the middle by Act 10. Half of the yard signs and bumper stickers said “Recall Walker”; half said “Support Walker.” Mainline pastors were on one side and the evangelicals were on the other. Could pastors find common ground in this conflict or at least be civil in expressing their differences?

The state senator for Richland County was Dale Schultz, who had not yet declared which way he would vote. When a labor leader asked Engel if he would organize district pastors to meet with and lobby Senator Schultz, he agreed. Ten pastors signed on—including Breininger, the only evangelical.

On the drive to Madison the two men argued about the state budget and Act 10 and about how each would lobby on different sides of the issue. In the car, Engel’s cell phone rang. One of RCMA’s evangelical pastors was on the line. “Larry, turn the car around,” the pastor begged. “Don’t do this. You’re destroying all of the hard work of our association in one act. This is political. This will break us apart.”

Engel responded that he hoped that the trip would convey that there was room for different opinions. He passed the phone to Mike, who concurred. “I’m not compromising any of my beliefs by being part of this delegation,” he said.

Thousands of people were protesting in Madison that day, and chants echoed throughout the capitol rotunda. In Schultz’s office, Breininger was the only one of the ten clergy present who supported Walker’s legislation.

Just before going into the meeting, the pastors’ group was told that a press conference had been set up so that the group could speak out against Act 10. The conference was scheduled immediately following the meeting.

“I felt manipulated,” said Engel, “as if I were being asked to play a character in a public drama. I also knew my side would lose no matter how Senator Schultz voted. I declined the invitation to participate in that interview.”

Back at home, the evangelical pastor who had wanted to halt their trip said, “I’m OK with it now. I never expected you two to be in the same car on the way to the capitol, especially when you are on opposite sides.”

Breininger sees that visit to the capitol as “the first big test of our newly formed camaraderie.” When Engel declined the opportunity to speak, Breininger’s respect for him jumped several notches.

“Larry was not expressing the liberal anger I’d seen for the last 30 years. We argued about the issues *because* this was a guy I could trust. We have seen good things happen together.”

Two weeks later the RCMA sponsored the May National Day of Prayer for the first time. Sixteen pastors and a handful of others convened at the Episcopal church. They were led by a retired Episcopal priest, a veteran of local religious clashes. Pastors took turns reading scripture and reciting prayers from the Book of Common Prayer. Mike led the Confession and Forgiveness of Sins—an evangelical in a mainline church forgiving the sins of everyone with a reading from the Book of Common Prayer.

When Breininger’s two-year term as president of RCMA ended, he was torn. Although initially he hadn’t wanted the job, he’d come to enjoy it and had seen progress. If this grand experiment was to keep going, there was only one thing to do: Engel had

to become the next president. “I could never have imagined myself nominating a liberal mainline pastor, but that’s what happened,” said Breininger. “It was Larry’s turn to take leadership and my turn to support him.”

As president, Engel actively engaged evangelicals. He pushed for a Youth Advisor Initiative and helped the association develop church-operated homeless shelters. When liberals in the organization fell into “liberal speak,” he challenged them.

Today the RCMA has 22 member churches, holds five ecumenical worship events a year, and has become a creative incubator for cooperative church ministries. The Roman Catholic Church and Seventh-day Adventists joined the association after RCMA did some one-on-one relational work with their leaders. The Evangelical Ministerial Association has ceased to exist.

Richland Center Fellowship has four new rural homeless shelters: a 15-day emergency shelter rotating monthly between churches, a shelter for single men, a 90-day shelter for families with children, and two-year transitional shelters for families with children. Each effort is volunteer-led and church-funded. The association followed the lead of an interdenominational team of Christian women and developed a cooperative vacation Bible school and a youth ministries program.

The Family Restoration Project puts families with troubled youths together with mentoring church families and a youth adviser. The hope is that new relationships will emerge. The program is fully supported by the school district and recognized and funded by business leaders.

Breininger and Engel don’t pretend to have discarded their differences. The scars and wounds from the culture wars are still fresh, and rural communities are long on memory and quick to point fingers. But something has changed in Richland County.

“People now see the churches as influential and able to accomplish meaningful efforts,” says Breininger. “People look to the churches to make a difference in the community and in the lives of people. The Richland County experiment is working better than I had expected. I see God at work here, so there is no limit.”

Says Engel: “While it’s not clear just what the future holds or that the common ground will be held, we’re seeing an ecumenical cooperative of churches growing. Plus, although I’m still a liberal pastor, I’m no longer lonely.”

Read the RCMA's list of ten pastoral courtesies.