

# Tolerating Bad Behavior in the Church

by [Susan Nienaber](#) on October 2, 2017



[Japanmexperterna.se via Flickr](#)

Where is the line between tolerance and intolerance when it comes to the words and actions that we choose as people of faith?

## *Varieties of bad behavior*

As a congregational conflict specialist, I've told churches for years that "Healthy churches tend to have low tolerance for inappropriate behavior, while unhealthy churches tolerate all kinds of outrageous things, including words and actions that (at least in the past) would not be tolerated anywhere else." Common types of inappropriate behaviors include:

- When people demand to have their personal needs and wants met—over and against the church's mission. Because congregations are mission-driven organizations, this behavior is inappropriate.
- When folks spread conflict in thousands of ways instead of dealing directly with the person who is frustrating them. Instead they spread negativity throughout the congregation.
- When members circumvent the accepted governing and decision-making structures to push a personal agenda.
- When folks use bullying behaviors (e.g., name-calling, verbal attacks, gossip). If it's not OK on the playground at school it's not OK in the congregation.
- When a congregation establishes proper channels to give people ways to express concerns and get them addressed, and people refuse to use those proper channels but take their concerns to "the court of public opinion" by writing a negative blog about the congregation, starting a petition, posting negative comments on Facebook, etc.
- When the leadership of a church refuses to establish proper channels for concerns and instead labels folks as antagonists.

- When people withhold money as a way of pressuring the organization into giving them their way.
- When people take their toys and go home without any conversation at all.

There are some common patterns that I've noticed with congregations that tolerate too many inappropriate behaviors.

- Excusing those who behave badly. The most common phrase I hear is: “Well, that’s just [fill in the name]. S/he has been like that for years.” This is one of the most frustrating patterns for me. Just because the behavior has been tolerated in the past doesn’t make it right.
- Freezing up when somebody acts out. People may complain later—out in the parking lot or on the phone with a friend—but don’t hold one another accountable to any standard of behavior.
- Relying too much on the pastor, denominational executive or someone else to deal with issues. I’ve told many pastors not to let themselves become behavior police for the congregation. The risk is that the pastor will wind up too far out on a limb alone. Some people, instead of supporting the pastor, will just cut the limb off.

Congregations that tolerate bad behavior are not mission-driven but instead are consumer-oriented. They have created a social club where people are not being led and challenged to grow in their spiritual journey.

With the intense divisiveness in our country, congregations are well-positioned to role-model a different way of being together, meeting real needs and building connections across the divides. When the recent hurricanes devastated so many places, folks did come together to help each other. But I wonder why it takes a crisis to pull us together—and I’m not alone.

### *Stepping up and speaking out*

Many congregations are now stepping up and using this moment to speak out against hate in all forms and to connect with folks they don’t know, whose cultures and experiences they don’t yet understand. But we also need to pay attention to the ways we treat each another inside our congregations.

Here are some simple practices that congregations can adopt that make a difference:

- Create a behavioral covenant. A behavioral covenant is a simple set of promises we make to one another to create a healthy “immune system” for the congregation. Creating a covenant helps to identify unspoken patterns of behavior in the congregation and allows the congregation to establish better practices.

- Teach the congregation how to use “circle processes” to help people talk. These practices can be used for adult education, fellowship events and especially to talk about the tough stuff. I’m a big believer in circle methods for talking. A helpful resource is [\*The Little Book of Circle Processes: A New/Old Approach to Peacemaking\*](#) by Kay Pranis.
- Help the congregation to identify its invisible fault lines—natural differences between groups, such those who attend different worship services, come from different congregations that have merged, who belong to different generations. Fault lines are often harmless until a conflict arises: then the congregation breaks along its fault lines. Be intentional about helping people get to know one another across the fault lines. If you usually go to the traditional service, figure out a way to get to know the people who go to the contemporary service. This is great preventive medicine.
- Help your members form relationships with people who belong to other groups and faith communities in your community. Now is the time for all of us to step out of our comfort zones!

Susan Nienaber embraces an unwavering dedication to the health, vitality and mission of congregations and of the leaders and institutions that support them. She serves as District Superintendent in the Minnesota Conference of the United Methodist Church, and occasionally consults with congregations on issues of conflict, dialogue, crisis, personnel, professional misconduct, leadership, and interpersonal dynamics.