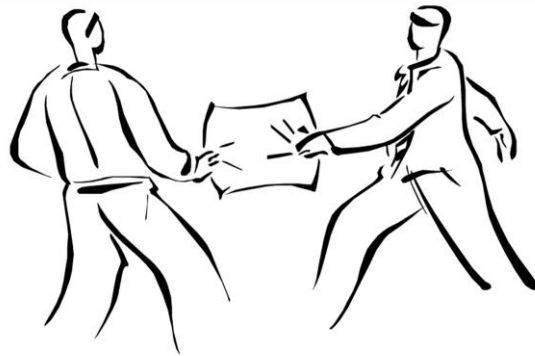


Conflict Module I: Conflict Awareness



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Conflict Module I: Conflict Awareness

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Too often, people believe that if we are faithful as Christians, everything will be all right and life will be pleasant. When there is unpleasantness or conflict, they believe that somehow, someone is not being faithful. Rather, scripture shows us that disagreement and conflict are a normal part of the faith journey, of becoming the Body of Christ. By working through our conflicts, we often gain a greater understanding of what the Spirit is doing in our midst. How we respond to conflict in our lives says much about our witness in the world.

Change – in leadership, membership, mission – will, in and of itself, invoke conflict so understanding the early warning signs and being clear on how we, as individuals, respond in conflict situations can help us navigate the transition phase. Alban Institute Senior Consultant Alice Mann has said that one of the “great myths” of the church is that change is possible without conflict.

Conflict Is a Fact Of Life

Let's make sure we know something about it ...



... and about our own conflict styles

Conflict Module 1: Conflict Awareness - 2

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Let's look at how you respond to conflict. Find a partner, preferably someone in the group you do not yet know well.

Distribute a copy of Handout 1, "Exploring Your Responses to Conflict" from the Resource Section to each participant, telling them NOT to open it until you give the instructions.

This booklet contains a series of questions. With your partner, take turns answering each question in turn without looking ahead in the booklet. Feel free to jot down your responses as you go along. There are no right or wrong answers. Be as spontaneous and specific as possible.

After they have a chance to work through the exercise, reconvene the group.

What was this experience like? What surprised you about your responses? What did you learn? What questions were raised for you?

Summarize common themes on a flip chart.

Understanding Conflict

Our word “conflict” comes from the Latin “*confligere*”, which means “to strike together.”



Talking Points

Let's look at the origin of the word “conflict”.

**Striking together two flints makes sparks
creating FIRE – a source of either ...**



POSITIVE ENERGY or DESTRUCTION!

Conflict Module I: Conflict Awareness - 4

Fresh Start

Talking Points

So, too, with conflict – it can be the source of energy and of great destruction.

**“Nothing is more dangerous
than an idea, when it is the
only one you have.”**

Émile-Auguste Chartier

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

In *Leading Change in Congregations*, Gil Rendle notes that while conflict is two or more ideas “striking together” in the same place at the same time, it is not necessarily a “fight”. He adds: “If your congregation and its leaders have only *one* idea, you are probably in trouble if you are facing a time that requires adaptability and experimentation....Without such conflict, which is the engagement of differences, it is very hard to responsibly meet a changing future.” Working with the different ideas that produce conflict is good and necessary, especially in times of change. Out of the “conflict” of more than one idea can come energy, motivation, clarity and direction.

When have you experienced conflict which has been energizing and constructive?

Facilitate a large group discussion of examples when conflict has been energizing and capture themes on a flip chart.

Another View of Conflict



- Conflicts are power struggles over differences.
- The extent to which parties use power for “dirty” or “fair” fighting determines the consequences of a conflict.

Talking Points

Some experts believe that the desire for and use of power is a part of any conflict, even one which is healthy and constructive. *How* people use power becomes as much a matter of their faith’s expression as the conflicting ideas over which they struggle. Clergy and lay leaders who experience “dirty fighting” in the church often become disillusioned and ask, “How can this be Christian?” It isn’t. But it’s *human*, and it’s our role as Christians to attempt to address the sources of the conflict and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to help resolve it and encourage reconciliation. We’ll say more later about “fair” fighting which expresses Christian values and requires common ground rules.

How have you experienced the use of power in a church conflict?

How People Respond to Conflict in the Bible

- Some equate conflict with disobedience to God, like Cain and Abel.
- Others think it's about good vs. evil – David vs. Goliath, Israelites vs. Egyptians.
- Many think conflict is sinful, because the Bible calls Christians to be peacemakers.



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Fresh Start

Talking Points

How does your own understanding of conflict in the Bible influence your response to conflict in your own lives and in the church?

Facilitate a large group discussion.

Why is there conflict among Christians?

- Spiritual commitments and faith understandings are central to our psychological identity and self esteem.
We CARE!
- Churches profess a gospel that is volatile:
 - Christian religiosity acts to preserve the status quo.
 - Christian faithfulness acts to challenge and change it.
- Churches are voluntary organizations whose structures and processes allow and even evoke abuse of power.

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

These root sources of conflict in churches relate back to people's understanding of what the Bible has to say about conflict and to the use of power. They are important to understand and discuss.

- In church conflicts, our core identities are at risk. Our self esteem is on the line. So we slip easily into taking differences personally and using any means to justify our goal of emotional self-protection.
- Christians' inner conflict between religious security and spiritual risk-taking generates emotional conflict among believers.
- Churches often do not hold either members or clergy accountable for how they use power, and so power is often abused.

Take a minute to reflect on these statements and comments. What are the implications for church leaders? How are they reflected in your experience?

Distribute and review Handout 2 "Some Common Sources of Conflict in Churches".

Which of these have you experienced?

How Do We Know Conflict is Brewing?

- Withdrawal, reduced participation, reduced financial giving
- “Parking lot conversations”, “murmuring”
- Difficulty making what should be routine decisions
- Attempts to triangle
- Rigid positions or ultimatums
- Blaming
- Lies
- Secrets
- Increasing distrust



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Fresh Start

Talking Points

These **traditional early warning signs** are not meant to say, “if this is present, there is harmful conflict brewing.” Rather, their presence might be a hint that conflict may occur. **Leaders should be attentive and check these out when they see them.** This is especially important for those whose characteristic response to conflict is avoidance.

- **Reduced participation:** People often deal with conflict with their feet: they just avoid it and walk away. When people withdraw or start voting with their checkbooks, always find out why! (Or if you know, address the issue quickly and directly.)
- **“Parking lot conversations” after meetings:** May mean people aren’t saying what they think and feel *in* the meeting.
- **Difficulty making routine decisions:** If you see this happening, tell the group and engage them in exploring the reasons.
- **Doomsaying, complaining:** A little is normal. When it increases, check out why.
- **Attempts to triangle:** Continually model direct communication and build behavioral norms in which triangling is unacceptable.
- **Rigid positions or ultimatums:** When people start acting like this, it is usually a sign of defensive positions and conflict.
- **Blaming:** Encourage a communication norm of “no blaming” – but address it when it happens.
- **“Making nice”:** People do this when they sense conflict and want to avoid it.
- **Unplanned shifts in leadership:** Why is this happening? What’s behind the shift? Conflict?
- **Lies, secrets, increasing distrust:** These may be difficult to surface, but it is essential to do so before healing can begin. “What is unknown and concealed cannot be healed.”

Are there other signs you would add to this list? **Distribute Handout 3, “Early Warning Signs of Conflict”, and highlight any which were not mentioned.**

Different Kinds of Conflict

- **Intrapersonal:** The conflict is within oneself; i.e., struggles between different parts of the self.
- **Interpersonal:** The conflict is between two or more persons and is related to differences (incompatibilities) between people and how they feel about each other, not what they think about issues.
- **Substantive:** The conflict can be between individuals or between groups and has to do with facts, means, ends or values.

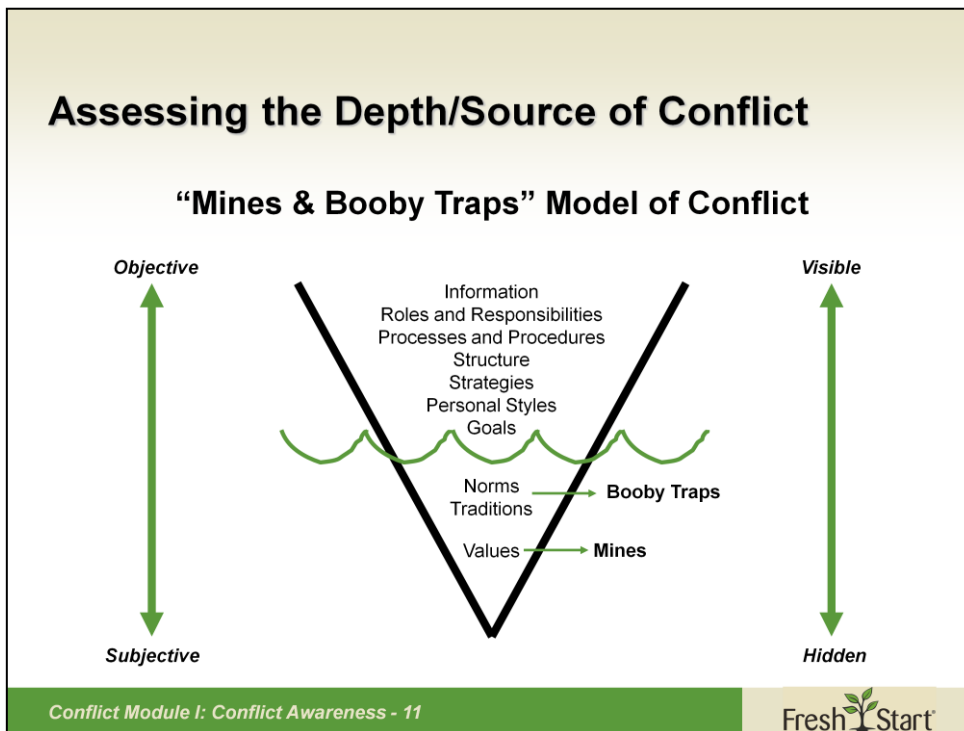
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Talking Points

Now let's move to expanding our conceptual understanding of conflict. While the different kinds of conflict may at first glance seem obvious, it is important to understand both the distinctions and possible interrelationships between them. For example, our internal conflicts may result in sending confusing mixed messages which actually increase tensions between ourselves and others. Or we may believe our problem with another person is our different opinions, when the real problem is that we're annoyed by the person's way of expressing himself, not his opinions themselves. Interpersonal and substantive conflict may also be interrelated and can be confused. Unless we're clear about the kind of conflict we're dealing with, we can't know how to respond effectively.

Ask participants to share examples from their experience of each kind of conflict and how they may be interrelated or difficult to distinguish, and how this impacts the conflict situation and their response. How might they identify and then deal most effectively with each kind of conflict, based upon their own styles of response? Depending on time available and the size of the group, you may want to break into pairs from the previous exercise for this discussion, then reconvene to share questions, insights, and learnings.



Talking Points

This model can be extremely helpful in diagnosing what’s really going on in a conflict in order to respond effectively. Sources of conflict above the “water line” usually are easiest to identify and to resolve, particularly those at the top of the list, because they generally are visible and fairly objective. So if a conflict which appears to be about information becomes ugly (e.g., people start calling each other liars), it probably is really about something deeper, like norms or values. Conflicts over information often are really caused by *lack* of information or by inconsistent or conflicting information. So the first step in addressing a conflict which appears to be about information is to get objective facts and make sure everyone involved has them as the basis for discussion.

Another frequent cause of conflict for church vestries or committees is unclear roles and responsibilities. Once identified, this usually can be resolved by clarifying mutual expectations, writing and agreeing on job descriptions, etc. Note that “goals” is just above the water line, because goals are often related to the “mines” and “booby traps” below. Conflicts involving norms and traditions (“how we do things around here”) and values (what people believe and hold sacred) are the most difficult to address. For example, it is no accident that some of the worst church fights are about worship, because it involves norms, traditions, and values. These are highly subjective and may be hidden. Thus it is essential to go as deep as necessary in exploring what conflict is really about and then *surface* the real issues so people can see them accurately and with greater objectivity.

Distribute Handout 3, “Mines and Booby Traps” model.

Are Your Congregation's Conflicts ...

- Intrapersonal, interpersonal, or substantive?
- Subjective or Objective?
- Hidden or Visible?
- Above or below the water line?

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

Think about a current or recent conflict in your congregation. What is its source and where might it fit into the "Mines and Booby Traps" diagram? How have you and others involved dealt with it? How effective has been the behavior of you and other leaders in addressing this conflict, and why?

Facilitate a large group discussion, capturing where on the model the various conflicts fall. (You might want to draw the model on a flip chart.)

Now let's take a deeper look at your personal style of conflict. This questionnaire comes from the Mennonite Peace and Justice Support Network.

Distribute the Adult Personal Style Conflict Inventory (see Resources section).

Styles of Dealing with Conflict

- **Collaborating:** “Let’s all work together to solve this problem.”
- **Compromising:** “Let’s meet half-way and split the difference.”
- **Accommodating:** “I don’t care that much; have it your way.”
- **Avoiding:** “I’m outta here”; “I’d rather not deal with this now”.
- **Competing or Forcing:** “My way or no way.”

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Fresh Start 

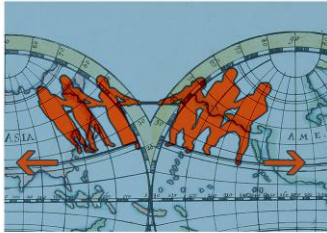
Talking Points

After participants individually complete the exercise, distribute Handout 4 “Effective Use of Conflict Styles”.

Find the person you partnered with earlier and share your Inventory results. With your partner discuss the extent to which your responses in the initial exercise and in this one correspond, and what this may suggest. Use the handout to help you identify the kinds of situations in which your personal “style” works best and in what situations it is less effective (for example, how effective has your style been in the conflicts described using the “Mines and Booby Traps” model?) Identify your “growing edges” and behavioral changes you might want to make to increase your versatility in dealing with conflict.

After the pairs have had a chance to discuss, reconvene as a large group and ask them to offer any learnings/aha’s they have gotten.

The Influence of People's Background



- Individual vs. group
- Relationships vs. resolution
- Direct vs. indirect confrontation
- High vs. low power distance

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

Congregations are made up of individual members, each of whom has a preferred conflict style. In addition congregations are increasingly multi-cultural – and not all cultures approach conflict or understand use of power and authority in the same way.

For example, many (if not most) cultures are less individually-oriented than the predominant American culture. The interests of the community are seen as of greater importance than those of the individual, and maintaining relationships may be more important than confronting differences. This tendency supports greater toleration of ambiguity in relationships during times of disagreement, leading to the community staying together in spite of differences. In an article in the November-December 1995 issue of Alban Institute publication, Congregations, author Virstan B. Y. Choy, calls this the paradox of “solidarity in conflict”.

Western, and particularly American, conflict resolution processes favor open confrontation – “get everything out on the table”. For cultures where face-saving is important, public airing of disagreement may not be the norm. This leads to a preference for a less direct form of conflict engagement, for example the use of a go-between who talks individually to each person involved in the dispute and uses shuttle diplomacy to reach an accord.

Another consideration is the extent to which people believe they have access to power. Cultures with what Dutch sociologist, Geert Hofstede, calls “low power distance” believe that people have access to power, that they can participate and feel they have (or can have) ownership in the outcome. “High power distance” cultures feel that only a certain “elite” or perhaps the elders have access to power. People from these cultures are less likely to question authority, to actively participate in a conflict resolution process OR to feel a sense of ownership of the eventual resolution itself.

Such subcultures are not limited to ethnic or national groups alone – they can arise from differences within a nationality based on factors such as education or class. What examples of these kinds of dynamics affecting conflict resolution have you experienced in congregations?

**“If you haven’t fought with each other,
you don’t know each other.”**

– Chinese Proverb

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

Here’s an example of a proverb about conflict from a non-Western culture. What is your response to this proverb? What does it say to you?

Ask the group for quick responses. People from Western cultures typically respond that deeper encounter and fuller understanding are positive benefits of conflict. The typical response of those from Eastern cultures, however, is that conflict reveals the negative side of the person who loses “face” in the situation.

Are these different culture-based interpretations surprising to you? This is just one illustration of how cultural backgrounds cause us to perceive different realities not only about conflict but about many aspects of life. Thus it is very important to check out the validity of our assumptions when dealing with people from cultures different from our own. What challenges to culture-based assumptions have you experienced in relationships with people from different backgrounds? How have you dealt with them?

Are There Christian Ways to Handle Conflict?

- A conflict may be judged as more or less “Christian” by how participants exercise power in dealing with their differences.
- Participants demonstrate these behaviors by:
 - Maintaining a non-anxious presence
 - Respectfulness
 - Assertiveness
 - Accountability
 - Seeking a larger common good

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Talking Points

Clergy and lay leaders need to model these behaviors and encourage them as healthy norms for handling conflict in their congregations. Doing so requires self-knowledge and awareness and the willingness to change one's preferred style of behavior when appropriate, acceptance of conflict as a normal part of life, and understanding of what causes it, especially in churches.

When have you used these behaviors in conflict situations and how have they impacted the outcome? What has helped to obtain buy-in from members of your congregations to observing these behavioral norms around conflict and the use of power?

Note: Conflict Module II: Conflict Management explores effective ways of handling conflict, including developing behavioral covenants in congregations and dealing with different levels of conflict intensity, and is designed to follow this module in a separate session.