Conflict Module I: Conflict Awareness

Purpose

To help participants recognize that conflict is a normal part of life, including church life; to develop their awareness of various views, sources, kinds and signs of church conflict; and to explore their own characteristic responses to conflict.

Theological Understanding

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.

Special Instructions

This module is intended and works best as the first of two consecutive sessions on conflict. Prior to the session you will need to download and print sufficient copies of the Conflict Style Inventory from the Mennonite Peace Network web site (see Resources).

Related Modules

> Conflict Module II
> Dialogue: Searching for Common Ground
> Habits, Norms and Expectations
> Polarities: Differences to be Managed
> Power, Authority and Influence
> Role Clarity
> Renegotiating Roles and Expectations

Bibliography

Understanding and Dealing With Conflict in Church Systems

Boers, Arthur Paul; Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior. Herndon, VA, The Alban Institute, 1999. Boers is a Mennonite pastor and Benedictine Oblate who has dedicated his life to peacemaking. The book is based in family systems theory.

Friedman, Edwin H. Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue, New York, N.Y, The Guilford Press, 1985. The classic guide!

Halverstadt, Hugh F. Managing Church Conflict. Louisville, Kentucky, Westminster Press, 1991. Speed Leas has called this "the best book available on conflict in religious systems". Theologically and scripturally based.

Johnson, Barry H. Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems. Amherst, MA, HRD Press, 1992. Innovative approach to identifying and dealing with conflicts which are really "polarities to manage", not "problems to solve".

Leas. Speed B. Moving Your Church Through Conflict. Herndon, VA, The Alban Institute, 2002 – this paper provides detailed descriptions of Leas' seven levels of conflict model, strategies to use at each, and the impact of church size on conflict; available as a download PDF file from Alban (www.alban.org; go to Publishing and under Find a Book, Video or Download browse by author's name).

Lott, David B. ed. Conflict Management in Congregations. Herndon, VA, The Alban Institute, (Harvesting the Learnings Series), 2001. Collection of essays with introduction by Speed B. Leas.

Rendle, Gilbert R. Leading Change in Congregations: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders. Herndon, VA, The Alban Institute, 1998 -- Emphasizes and clarifies the potentially positive role of healthy conflict in organizational change.

_____. Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences. Herndon, VA, The Alban Institute, 1999. A reader-friendly, practical book covering background theory on uncivil behavior, the role of leadership, and guides for establishing behavioral covenants with examples.

Richardson, Ronald W. Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press, 1996. Down-to-earth approach emphasizing importance of understanding system dynamics and self-differentiated leadership.

Steinke, Peter L. How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems, Herndon, VA, The Alban Institute, 1993.

_____. Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach. Herndon, VA, The Alban Institute, 1996. Both of Steinke's books are highly recommended – "user-friendly" and full of practical applications.

Mediation, Negotiation and Basic Communication in Conflict Situations

Bush, Robert A.B. and Folger, Joseph. The Promise of Mediation: Responding to Conflict Through Empowerment and Recognition. San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass, Inc.; 1994. Review the basic premises in this book – the rest is for professional mediators.

Day, Katie. Difficult Conversations: Taking Risks, Acting with Integrity. Herndon, VA, The Alban Institute, 2001 – a look at how to engage in discussions of controversial topics as a way of being faithful in community.

Fisher, Roger and Ury, William. Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In. New York, N.Y, Penguin Books, 1991. The classic negotiation model.

Heen, Sheila; Patton, Bruce; Stone, Douglas. Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most,. New York, N.Y, Viking-Penguin, 1999. The authors, all members of the Harvard Negotiation Project, present a powerful, down-to-earth, experience based approach to dealing with interpersonal conflict in just about any setting.

Conflict in Various Cultural Settings

Augsberger, David W. Conflict Mediation Across Cultures. Louisville, KY, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. Provides insights into how different cultural groups address conflict and implications for dealing with it in these cultures.

McKinney, Lora-Ellen. Getting to Amen: Eight Strategies for Managing Conflict in the African American Church,   Valley Forge, PA, Judson Press 2005. Applies basic conflict management principles to the culture of African American churches.

Web-based Resources

The Alban Institute: www.alban.org – Alban offers a wealth of educational and consulting resources related not only to conflict but to many aspects of church leadership and ministry. The Alban publications cited in this bibliography are available through its website, look under Publishing.

Mennonite Peace and Justice Support Network: http://peace.mennolink.org – This web-site provides a wide array of congregational conflict and peacemaking resources and is the source of the conflict style assessment used in this Module. To download the assessment instrument, click on "Resources," then "Adults," "Conflict Styles." A printable version is available after you click on "free online survey."

Public Conversations Project: www.publicconversations.org – PCP conducts dialogues between dissenting groups and dialogue training throughout the world. They also work with individual congregations in conflict. Its website provides downloadable guides for fostering dialogue on difficult topics as well as information about PCP's training and consultation opportunities.

General Outline of Session

1. Opening prayer/meditation (suggested reading Ephesians 4:14-16)

2. Exploring participants' own conflict style (PowerPoint 2; Talking Points; Handout 1. exercise done in pairs, followed by large group debrief.)

3. Understanding conflict (PowerPoint 3-7; Talking Points; general discussion)

4. Sources of conflict in congregations (PowerPoint 8; Talking Points; Handout 2; general discussion)

5. Early warning signs of conflict (PowerPoint 9; Talking Points; Handout 3; general discussion)

6. Different kinds of conflict (PowerPoint 10; Talking Points; general discussion)

7. Assessing conflict (PowerPoint ll-12; Talking Points; general discussion)

8. Personal Conflict Style Inventory (print copies for each participant from Mennonite Peace web site – see resource section – and ask them to complete and score the instrument, then share the results with the partner they had in opening exercise)

9. Debrief the Personal Conflict Style Inventory (PowerPoint 13; Talking Points; Handout 4; general discussion)

10. Cultural influences on conflict (PowerPoint 14-15; Talking Points; general discussion)

11. Christian ways to handle conflict (Power Point 16; Talking Points; general discussion)

12. Wrap-up and closing prayer

Conflict Module I
Exploring Your Responses to Conflict
Handout 1

Objective

This exercise is designed to address the question, "How do you respond to conflict?" by exploring your own thoughts and feelings about conflict, sharing your responses with a partner, and then reflecting on this experience with the whole group.

Directions

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.

1. <u>Conflict is</u> …

2. <u>When I'm aware that I have a conflict with another person, I usually</u> …

3. <u>**Some things I would not do even though they might help me win in a conflict situation are**</u> …

4. <u>The best thing that can come out of conflict is</u> …

5. <u>The worst thing is</u> …

6. **<u>A specific time when I felt good about how I handled conflict with another person was</u> ...**

7. <u>I feel most vulnerable during a conflict when</u> …

8. <u>In a conflict, I resent it when</u> …

9. <u>My greatest strength in handling a conflict is</u> …

10. <u>My greatest personal challenge in handling conflict effectively is</u> …

Conflict Module I
Some Common Sources of Conflict in Churches
Handout 2

Note: *The sources noted below are often interrelated. It is important to try to identify these sources at the first indications of conflict in the parish, in order to clearly define the problem(s) and work toward solution. Also, the best way to* <u>prevent</u> *destructive conflict is for clergy and lay leaders to conduct ongoing "preventive maintenance" in these areas; e.g., to ensure roles, responsibilities, structures, and processes are clearly defined, communicated, and understood by all those involved.*

1. **Clergy Roles and Responsibilities Are Unclear.** Especially when clergy do not have a clear contract <u>and</u> written statement of their current roles, responsibilities and performance objectives as mutually agreed upon with the vestry and communicated to the congregation, unclear and often unrealistic expectations arise on both sides. If these unstated expectations are not met, conflict may result.

2. **Structure Is Unclear.** When churches lack clear guidelines for the roles and responsibilities of clergy, staff, vestry, committees or other laity, and how these relate to each other in terms of organizational structure and communication, no one is sure who is to do what. The resulting ambiguity obscures accountability and opens the door to conflict over "whose job it is".

3. **Clergy and Parish Leadership Styles Don't Match.** In a perfect world, the issue of leadership styles would be resolved during the search process, and parishes would call clergy whose style fits their expectations (authoritarian or shared leadership, process or task oriented, etc.). In the real world, people and organizations change or may not be what they seem, and even the best search process cannot ensure the "perfect match". In addition, laity may have unacknowledged expectations based on experiences with previous clergy. Any or all of this may contribute to conflict over leadership style.

4. **Structure No Longer Fits the Congregation's Size.** In congregations which are changing dramatically in size, (either growing or shrinking) many issues arise. If the congregation is shrinking, the volunteers burn out. The former organizational structure may no longer be appropriate. If the congregation is growing, the priest is unable to minister to everyone personally. Conflict may arise over "lack of pastoral care" by the priest, or other issues.

5. **New Clergy/Lay Leadership Rush Into Change.** New clergy may institute changes without apparent regard for the traditions and feelings of long-time parish members. If new clergy and lay leaders who support him/her do not involve the congregation in decisions to bring about change, and in so doing do not develop the necessary level of trust and support, conflict is inevitable.

6. **Poor Communications/Lack of Information.**   Timely, reliable, effectively communicated information builds trust. Lack of valid information destroys trust. For example, when people "triangle", i.e., go to a third party with complaints instead of going directly to the person with whom they have a problem, valid information becomes scarce. Distrust and blaming others increase and may lead to conflict, either overt or covert.

7. **Attitudes of Church People Toward Conflict.** Some church-goers believe conflict is un-Christian. Others want the church to be a refuge from the conflict they experience in other areas of their lives. These people avoid conflict or try to cover it up, with the result that it goes "underground" without being resolved, where it may fester or gather momentum until some incident triggers an explosion. A reasonable level of conflict in a parish is inevitable and potentially healthy. The cost of covering it up rather than dealing with it can be very great.

8. **Values and Beliefs.** Church members may disagree over what the church's mission ought to be, based upon such deeply held values as those concerning racial, gender, and ethnic inclusion issues, etc. As a consequence, not only will the church lack clear goals or objectives, but deep and painful divisions may result. (It is important to determine whether the lack of clear goals is a cause or a symptom of conflict, and to identify where areas of real agreement and disagreement lie.) If the values conflict is pervasive, an intensive, facilitated congregational dialogue process may be an effective route to the healing which must occur before the parish can move forward.

9. **Money Is Used As a Means of Power/Control.** Control of resources becomes an issue when people feel ignored or powerless. People threatening to withdraw their financial support from the church need first of all to feel <u>heard</u>. Then problem definition and resolution of conflict can begin to take place.

Conflict Module I
Early Warning Signs of Conflict
Handout 3

*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.*

- **Withdrawal, reduced participation**: People often deal with conflict with their feet: they just avoid it and walk away. When people withdraw, always find out why! (Or if you know, address the issue quickly and directly.)

- **Reduced financial giving:** When people start voting with their checkbooks, it is often a way of exercising power and control inappropriately. Encourage them to engage in open, honest dialogue about issues they disagree on, instead.

- "**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 this way, it is usually a sign of defensive positions and underlying conflict.

- **Blaming:** Model and encourage a communication norm of "no blaming' – but address it when it happens. This is important in creating a "safe space" in which people feel comfortable expressing themselves.

- **"Making nice":** People do this when they sense conflict and want to avoid it.

- **Unplanned shifts in leadership**: Find out why is this happening. What's behind the shift? Is it conflict? Are there power plays going on?

- **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."*

Conflict Module I
Conflict Management Styles
Handout 4

One of these styles may be your characteristic way of dealing with conflict. You may also have a "back-up" style for use when your primary method doesn't work. Each style is useful under certain circumstances, but *no one style will work under all circumstances.* Therefore, it's *important to understand when the use of each style is most appropriate, and to develop flexibility in your response to various situations.*

Collaborating: *"Let's all work together to solve this problem."* Most likely to result in "best" or win/win solution, but takes time. Gather data; consider alternatives. Assert your views while inviting those of others. Welcome differences; identify all main concerns; generate options. Express and work through emotions, reservations and doubts. Evaluate varying viewpoints objectively against facts. Search for mutual agreement on a solution which meets as many concerns as possible.

> **Works BEST when:**
> * You have sufficient time.
> * You care about both issues and relationships.
> * You want to get thoughts and feelings out and deal with them, so they don't cause problems later.
> * There is reasonable hope of addressing all concerns.
>
> **Works LEAST well when:**
> * You need to do something quickly. ("Fire! Everybody out!")
> * People don't care that much about the issue, and/or the issue is unimportant.
> * Participants are unwilling to modify their views in order to serve best interests of all concerned.

Compromising: *"Let's meet halfway and split the difference."* Urge moderation; bargain; find and accept middle-ground positions so no one wins or loses. Be sure parties understand real issues, listen, problem-solve, consider long-term consequences of compromise.

> **Works BEST when:**
> * You need a quick solution and both can give up something.
> * You both want the same thing and it can be divided or shared.
> * You are willing to let chance decide (flip a coin).
> * You want to forestall a win/lose situation and know a win/win isn't possible.
>
> **Works LEAST well when:**
> * You might find a better solution for all parties by working a little longer.

Accommodating: *" I don't care that much; have it your way."* Disagreements are smoothed over or ignored so that surface harmony is maintained. Decide it's no big deal and doesn't matter. Accept the other's view; give in; acknowledge your error.

> **Works BEST when:**
> - You realize you're wrong.
> - You care more about the person than about the issue.
>
> **Works LEAST well when:**
> - You're avoiding deeper issues or backing down to gain acceptance and likely to resent it later.
> - You do this a lot and wish you could speak up for yourself more often.

Avoiding: *"I'm outta here." "I'd rather not deal with this now."* You delay your response or withdraw to avoid dealing with situations which would arouse conflict.

> **Works BEST when:**
> - Time's too short.
> - You don't care enough about the issue - stakes aren't worth the battle.
> - You (or someone else) are very angry and need time to cool off before discussing the issue.
> - You are in a dangerous situation and need to protect yourself.
>
> **Works LEAST well when:**
> - You rarely want to deal with conflicts in your life.
> - You care about an issue but are afraid to speak up.
> - You keep being bothered by ongoing issues with someone you care about.

Competing or Forcing: *"My Way or No Way!"* The aim is to suppress disagreement and control the outcome, no matter what. Win-lose power struggles are fought out and may need to be decided by highest common authority or third-party arbitration.

> **Works BEST when:**
> - Other approaches have failed, time's too short and decision is critical to deadline.
> - There's physical danger. ("Watch out for that car!")
> - You truly are right and it is important to you that others recognize it.
> - Others really don't care what happens.
>
> **Works LEAST well when:**
> - You often use this approach with people you care about or will need to work with in the future.
> - You want people to feel they can discuss and disagree with you openly.