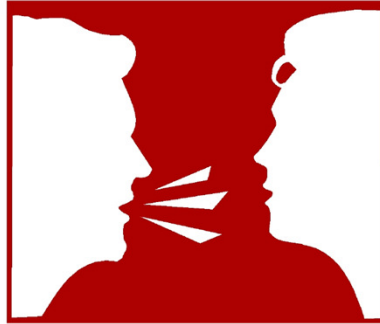


Conflict Module II: Conflict Management



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Conflict Module II: Conflict Management

Fresh Start[®]

Talking Points

As Christians we are called to love one another as God loves us, to treat others as we want to be treated, and to work together to create Shalom – God’s peace. But as we all have experienced, this is easier said than done. Some of the most un-Godly behavior is seen in church conflicts when people exercise power in destructive ways.

As we learned in Conflict Module I: Conflict Awareness, the place to begin is by understanding not only the nature of conflict but of ourselves and our own responses to conflict. We concluded by looking at some ways of exercising power and handling conflict which are in accord with values and principles we embrace as Christians. These include maintaining a non-anxious presence, showing respect for others, being appropriately assertive, being and holding others accountable, and continually seeking a larger common good. This module further explores such behaviors and how to develop and nurture them so that our conflicts are healthy and we emerge from them stronger, wiser, more faithful Christians.

God's Work and Ours in Dealing with Conflict

- The *ultimate* goal in dealing with conflict is **reconciliation, which is God's work and gift.**
We cannot achieve it solely by our own efforts.
- Thus as humans, our goals must be **operational**; i.e., trying to create environments in which the possibilities for reconciliation are increased.

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

Before we explore behaviors and tools for managing conflict, let's identify some goals for this work. In his Alban Institute paper, "Moving Your Church through Conflict" (see resource section), consultant Speed Leas emphasizes that **reconciliation is God's work.** We cannot achieve it solely by our own efforts. So our goals must be operational; i.e., trying to create environments in which the possibilities for reconciliation are increased. We can only invite ourselves and others into new relationships; we cannot force them.

How do you respond to these goals? In what ways are they the same or different from your own understanding of conflict?

Creating Possibilities for Reconciliation

- Reduce fear
- Be proactive – develop behavioral covenants
- Understand the “big picture”
- Try not to personalize
- Provide a safe environment
- Help participants develop conflict management skills

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

Reduce fear – our own and others’: Fear weakens our ability to think and act rationally and to hear and understand others. It also may motivate the use of destructive tactics for self-protection. To create an environment in which we and others feel safe in discussing differences, we must first reduce our own fear of conflict and its possible outcomes. We also must increase our own tolerance for differences.

- Proactively prepare by developing behavioral covenants. In his book *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations*, Gil Rendle emphasizes that the time to develop agreements for how leaders and others in the congregation will behave toward each other is before serious disagreements begin, not in the middle of conflict misbehavior. We’ll talk more about covenants in the next slides.
- Understand the “big picture.” Rendle also encourages clergy to get other congregational leaders to join them “up on the balcony”, where they can step back, reflect, more clearly see the larger picture of what’s happening in the system so they can plan appropriate next steps without getting sucked into what’s happening. This is a way of reducing our own fear and reactivity and practicing “non-anxious presence”.
- Try not to personalize – separate “your stuff” from “their stuff.” Self-differentiation involves the ability NOT to take things personally. Remember that while people may try to blame you for conflict, and you may share responsibility, it’s never just about you. It’s also about them, and often stems from the context of a church culture which long predates you and may take months or years to change. So you need to look for root causes of conflict and maintain a balanced perspective.
- Provide a safe environment for disagreement. Behavioral covenants which hold people accountable for their behavior help to create “safe space” where people can disagree knowing they’ll be heard, without fearing verbal and/or emotionally attack.
- Help participants develop conflict management skills which strengthen the organization. Leas says that conflict is like tennis; you can’t learn how to do it by watching. You have to actually participate in it to learn and develop your skills. The goal is for participants to emerge from conflict with increased understanding both of themselves and of the skills and processes they have developed and used, so that what they have learned will help them manage future conflicts effectively.

How have you experienced some of these ways of creating possibilities for reconciliation. What would you add?

Behavioral Covenants:

- Are promises, not rules.
- Are practiced as a spiritual discipline and an act of faith.
- Describe *behaviors* – “holy manners”
- Require mutual prayer, reflection, support and accountability.
- Serve as model behavior for the congregation.



Talking Points

Covenants in scripture are promises made by God to humanity. God keeps promises; it is harder for us to keep ours. Thus behavioral covenants are practiced only with God’s help and must be supported by prayer. They also require leaders to reflect on how well they are living out their covenant, to support each other in that effort, and to hold each other accountable for what Gil Rendle calls “holy manners” in a faith community.

Leaders – especially Vestries - who practice “holy manners” model those for the congregation. Leaders engaged in behavioral covenants are encouraged to share them with the congregation, enlist their prayerful support, and encourage other groups within the church to develop their own covenants.

Components of a Behavioral Covenant

- Our Promises to God

- Our Promises to Our Church Family

- Our Promises to Each Other

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Talking Points

Ideally, the development of behavioral covenants should be done in a day or an overnight retreat, with plenty of time for prayer and reflection, or incrementally as parts of regular meetings. Even if such a comprehensive process is not used, it is nevertheless essential for leadership groups to develop and agree upon a list of behaviors they will use during disagreements or more serious conflicts. Just as with more formal covenants, these behaviors should be agreed upon BEFORE disagreement begins, and group members must review them frequently and hold each other accountable for using them.

Distribute Handout 1, “Vestry Behavioral Covenant Example”. As you read this Covenant, what strikes you as particularly important? What might you add or modify? Have you used such a covenant in a church leadership group? If so, tell us about that experience. If not, how might such a covenant be useful to your own Vestry or other leadership groups?

Distribute Handout 2, “Behaviors for Working Through Conflict”. Whether or not you and your leadership group decide to develop a formal behavioral covenant, BEFORE conflict begins it is important to identify and agree upon specific behaviors the group promises to use during disagreement of any kind. As you review this handout, identify behaviors your Vestry already uses, and those they need to develop and work on. How can you help the group do this?

Speed Leas' Levels of Conflict



- V. Intractable
- IV. Fight / Flight
- III. Contest
- II. Disagreement
- I. Problem to solve

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Talking Points

Now let's move to additional tools for understanding and working through conflict. This model of levels of conflict intensity and how to deal with them was developed by Senior Alban Institute Consultant Speed B. Leas.

Being able to assess the level of intensity of a disagreement or more serious conflict is critical to knowing how to deal with it and when you need to get help. Remember that if not effectively addressed early on, conflicts tend to escalate. So it's important to diagnose the source and level of conflict and address it appropriately as soon as you become aware of it. If differences have moved beyond Level 1, the primary objective of your interventions as leader should be to de-escalate the conflict level to at least the next lower level.

Let's look at descriptions of all five levels and possible interventions for leaders. Then we'll apply this model and other learnings about conflict to a case study, "What Happened at St. Helen's".

Level I: *Problem to Solve*



- **Objective:** solve the problem rationally
- **Language:** specific, clear
- **Problem:** can be defined
- **Focus:** on problem
- **Environment:** open
- **Tone:** rational

Talking Points

Level I conflicts might not even be viewed as conflicts by many – there is a problem about whose solution people differ. The atmosphere, however, is not emotional as many would expect it to be in a conflict situation. People are able to articulate (and agree upon) the problem definition and to offer alternatives. Data and information are freely and willingly shared in an attempt to get to the best answer.

The suggested approach is go through all ten slides describing the levels of conflict and interventions, using the Talking Points to encourage comments, examples and questions as you go. Then participants will apply this model and other learnings about conflict to the case study and share insights.

Level I: *Interventions*

- Work with those directly involved in differences
- Encourage all to participate
- Engage in collaborative problem solving
 - Mutually define problem, gather data, search for alternative solutions
 - Choose a solution by consensus
- Follow up and evaluate solution.

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Talking Points

Distribute Handout 3, “A Process for Managing Differences Effectively”, which expands on these interventions in more detail and provides a structured model for using them.

This process really forms the first steps in intervening in conflicts at Levels I, II AND III. Take a minute to look over the handout.

What questions do you have about this process? What has been your experience in using a process like this? How effective was it, and why?

Level II: *Disagreement*



- **Objective:** self protection
- **Language:** generalizations
- **Problem:** less obvious
- **Focus:** score “points”
- **Environment:** not all data shared
- **Tone:** more emotional

Talking Points

The levels begin to blur here, and leaders really need to check out assumptions, especially about motivations and causes for conflict that often are not what they seem to be. Also, data begins to be “held close” (knowledge is power!). So it’s important to encourage openness – and check out your hunches if you suspect information is not being shared.

Level II: *Interventions*

- Work with those directly involved in differences
- Encourage all to participate
- Engage in collaborative problem solving
- Provide training in two-way communication
- Work on developing trust: sharing, openness
- Focus on common ground, organizational unity
- Keep people engaged constructively

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Talking Points

How do you go about developing trust? ***Facilitate a general discussion, capturing ideas on a flip chart.***

When have you helped people find common ground? How did you do that? ***Facilitate the sharing of several examples.***

Share an example of a Level II conflict in which you've been involved. Was it resolved before it escalated? If so, what helped? If not, what happened? What might have helped?

Facilitate a general discussion, capturing some "best practices" for preventing escalation and resolving issues at this level.

Level III: *Contest*

- **Objective:** winning
- **Language:** personal attacks
- **Problem:** issues distorted; problem not clearly identified
- **Focus:** forming coalitions
- **Environment:** based on assumptions
- **Tone:** confrontational



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Talking Points

Here's where the conflict becomes win/lose, and the stakes are higher. Maintaining self-differentiation and a non-anxious presence are survival skills for leaders now. If you haven't already done so, this is the time to "get up on the balcony" and look as objectively as possible at the larger context in which the conflict is occurring. As we'll see, it's also the time to get expert help.

Level III: *Interventions*

- Try initial steps as in Levels I and II
- Compromise/negotiate if collaboration fails
- Identify conflict behavioral norms
- Involve participants in structuring problem-solving process
- Help each party identify and express how they contribute to the dispute
- Identify common goals, history, values
- Clarify interests and look for common ground

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Talking Points

If you don't have a behavioral covenant for dealing with conflict, or if you do and it's not working, it's important for you and other leaders to identify the conflict behavioral norms – behaviors characteristic to the group and perhaps to the congregation during conflict --which are operating. Identifying these norms and sharing them with the group can be an eye-opener and provide an opportunity to engage people in trying new behavior. What conflict behavioral norms do you see in your Vestry? In your congregation?

However, as you'll see in the next slide, if your conflict situation has moved to Level III, you should ask for help from an outside expert before attempting these interventions.

Describe experiences you have had with conflicts at this level. What happened? Was an outside expert consulted? If so, to what extent was that useful?

Level III: Contest – Interventions

Get expert help!



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Fresh Start

Talking Points

If you have lots of knowledge, experience and skill in dealing with conflict, and if the conflict is not focused directly on you, you and other skilled leaders may be tempted to keep trying to de-escalate the conflict and manage it yourselves at this point. But that's risky and not recommended! The most common mistake of leaders experiencing escalating conflict is waiting too long before they ask for help, so that the conflict has already moved to Level IV or V before an expert is called in. The more you know about conflict, the better you will understand the necessity of asking for help BEFORE the need for it is desperate.

Bishop Mark Dyer, Professor Emeritus at Virginia Theological Seminary and mediator of disputes within the Anglican Communion, says: "Never go into conflict alone!" If your diocese does not have a bishop or staff members skilled in conflict management, and your church can't afford a professional outside consultant, look for another clergy or lay person outside your parish who has conflict management experience and can provide a wise and objective listening ear, feedback and personal support. Always remember that being **willing to ask for help** is a mature and powerful act, not a sign of weakness. it is a fundamental part of being the Body of Christ - no one part of the body can nor should do it all! As you review the five levels of conflict with the group, emphasize that anything above Level II needs outside help!

Level IV: *Fight/Flight*



- **Objective:** break the relationship
- **Language:** hurtful, humiliating
- **Problem:** less important than winning
- **Focus:** principles
- **Environment:** formation of factions
- **Tone:** stereotyping

Talking Points

This is where you don't want conflict to go! So our emphasis here has been upon keeping that from happening. But if it does, you must have expert help. What experiences have you had with this level of conflict? What made it most difficult or painful? How did it end, and why?

Level V: *Intractable*

- **Objective:** destroy the other
- **Language:** vengeful, bitter
- **Problem:** personalities become issues
- **Focus:** eternal cause, unambiguous principles
- **Environment:** formation of ideological groups
- **Tone:** any means are justified by the ends



Talking Points

Whether or not you have experienced a Level V conflict directly, you probably know of one. Briefly share a few such examples. What were the outcomes for the church or diocese involved?

The damage done by this kind of conflict is likely to last for years, scarring is deep and wounds are difficult to heal.

Levels IV & V: *Interventions*

Get expert help!



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Talking Points


Leaders experiencing conflict at these levels need to focus on their own emotional and perhaps professional survival, supported by expert help. Once the dust begins to settle, all involved will need skilled pastoral care and guidance as they begin the painful process of healing.

Distribute Handout 4, “Five Levels of Conflict”. This handout summarizes all five levels, with leader interventions through early Level III. It is a resource for reference.

Case Study: *What Happened at St. Helen's*

Exploring this case study provides an opportunity to apply not only *Levels of Conflict* theory, but other concepts discussed in Conflict Modules I and II.

Have fun!



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Talking Points

Distribute Handout 5, "What Happened at St. Helen's". Unless your group is very small, divide into pairs or small groups to read and then discuss the questions provided. Allow at least 30 minutes for this exercise and encourage participants to explore this conflict as fully as they can. Because this case study is necessarily brief, participants need to read between the lines and make some educated assumptions. Reconvene the whole group and ask participants to share insights, ideas and questions for another 20-30 minutes.

Here are some points which should be raised by the group. Suggest any the group misses and add your own as well.

While this case study is fictional, it is experience-based and intended to illustrate how poorly managed change and resulting disagreement – even when these appear to be quite minor -- can lead to serious conflict. The conflict described in the Epilogue is at Level III, moving into Level IV. Given the Rector's apparent inexperience in handling conflict effectively, she needs to engage the Vestry's support for calling expert help immediately. She should've done so earlier, but both she and other congregational leaders missed or ignored important warning signs that conflict might be brewing and allowed the situation to get out of hand.

Given the strong feelings of Mrs. Skinner and her supporters, some conflict probably was unavoidable. However, Mary and other leaders could have done several things differently from the beginning which would have reduced the level of intensity. Here are a few. First, not enough time was taken to ensure everyone was fully heard in the choir, Music and Liturgy Committee or Vestry and to reach real consensus. Signals were missed indicating resistance might be about more than musical preferences and a new hymnbook. Leaders heard what they wanted to and optimistically moved ahead without developing sufficient support for the change. For some, this resistance to change was based on strongly held personal values and in previous congregational history. If Mary and others were unaware of that history, once she heard Mrs. Skinner mention it, Mary needed to surface and publicly explore it so everyone understood history's role in the current conflict. There is no indication that Mary went directly to Mrs. Skinner after the initial Vestry discussion or later to learn more about the reasons for her position and feelings and explore common ground and ways to develop a mutually supportive relationship. This was a critical oversight. Nor does it appear that the Vestry or other groups had developed covenants for behaviors in disagreements which they could use as the conflict escalated. Finally, there apparently was no attempt to use a structured conflict resolution process like the one described in Handout 3. This too was a missed opportunity to de-escalate the conflict and work toward resolution. What others can you suggest?

Closing Thoughts

Remember that ultimately, reconciliation – like grace – is a gift from God. **Our job** is to create environments in which possibilities for reconciliation are increased. This requires us as leaders to be proactive, self aware, and prayerful, and to use our best knowledge, skills, tools, and – when needed – expert help.

SHALOM!

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Talking Points

What have you learned from this Conflict Module and the preceding one that you can apply in your congregation? What questions do you have, or what would you like to learn more about?

In conclusion, effective conflict management is both an art and a skill. It takes self-understanding, knowledge of conflict theory and tools, courage and practice. Some of us have more affinity for dealing with it than others. Conflict management is a complex, many-faceted subject which may include developing expertise in negotiation, mediation and dialogue. In these two Modules, we have covered only a few central ideas about conflict and its management.

Distribute copies of the module bibliography. If you are aware of conflict management training opportunities in your area, be sure to have these resources handy.

I encourage you to read selections from the bibliography provided, to obtain additional training, and to explore a variety of resources for developing your conflict management skills and comfort level.