Conflict Module II: Conflict Management

Purpose

To deepen participants' understanding of conflict and provide ideas and tools they can use in managing conflict effectively.

Theological Understanding

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 participants 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.

Special Instructions

As the second of two consecutive modules on conflict, to be effective it must be preceded by *Conflict Module I: Conflict Awareness*. The bibliography can be used as a handout.

Related Modules

> Conflict Module1
> Dialogue: Searching for Common Ground
> Habits, Norms and Expectations
> Polarities: Differences to be Managed
> Power, Authority and Influence in Congregations
> Role Clarity
> Renegotiating Roles and Expectations

Bibliography

Understanding and Dealing With Conflict in Church Systems

Boers, Arthur Paul; <u>Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior.</u> 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. <u>Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue</u>, New York, N.Y, The Guilford Press,1985 – the classic guide!

Halverstadt, Hugh F. <u>Managing Church Conflict</u>. 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. <u>Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems</u>. 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. <u>Moving Your Church Through Conflict</u>. 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 (<u>www.alban.org</u>; go to Publishing and under Find a Book, Video or Download browse by author's name).

Lott, David B. ed. <u>Conflict Management in Congregations</u>. Herndon, VA, Alban Institute, (Harvesting the Learnings Series), 2001 – collection of essays with introduction by Speed B. Leas.

Rendle, Gilbert R. <u>Leading Change in Congregations.</u> Herndon, VA, Alban Institute, 1998 – emphasizes and clarifies the potentially positive role of healthy conflict in organizational change.

_____. <u>Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences.</u> Herndon, VA, 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. <u>Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life,</u> Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press, 1996 – down-to-earth approach emphasizing importance of understanding system dynamics and self-differentiated leadership.

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

_____. Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach. Herndon, VA, 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

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 web-site; look under Publishing.

Mennonite Peace and Justice Support Network: http://peace.mennolink.org/resources This web site provides a wide array of congregational conflict and peacemaking resources and is the source of the conflict style assessment used in the Conflict I Module.

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 web site provides downloadable guides for fostering dialogue and a video training on dialogue, as well as information about PCP's training and consultation opportunities.

General Outline of Session

1. Opening prayer/meditation (suggested reading Ephesians 4:25-26a; 29-32)

2. Introduction and goal of reconciliation (PowerPoint 1-3; Talking Points; general discussion)

3. Behavioral covenants (PowerPoint 4-5; Talking Points; Handouts 1, 2; general discussion unless the group is very large; if so, break into small groups followed by large group debrief)

4. Levels of conflict intensity (PowerPoint 6-16; Talking Points; Handouts 3, 4; general discussion)

5. Case study (PowerPoint 17; Talking Points; Handout 5; discuss in pairs or small groups, followed by large group debrief)

6. Closing thoughts; wrap up (PowerPoint 18; Talking Points; Bibliography as handout; general discussion)

7. Closing prayer

Conflict Module II: Conflict Management
Handout 1

A Covenant of Leadership

Our Promises to God

We promise to pray, alone and together, to thank God and to ask for God's help in our lives and in our work for our Church, and we promise to listen to God's answer to us.

Our Promises to Our Church Family

We promise to demonstrate our leadership and commitment to our Church by our example.

We promise to support our Church pastors and staff so that their efforts can be most productive.

We promise to try to discover what is best for our Church as a whole, not what may be best for us or for some small group in the Church.

Our Promises to Each Other (as Vestry Members)

We promise to respect and care for each other.

We promise to treat our time on the Vestry as an opportunity to make an important gift to our Church.

We promise to listen with an open, nonjudgmental mind to the words and ideas of others in our Church and on the Vestry.

We promise to discuss, debate, and disagree openly in Vestry meetings, expressing ourselves as clearly and honestly as possible, so we are certain that the Vestry understands our point of view.

We promise to support the final decision of the Vestry, whether it reflects our view or not.

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Handout 2

Behaviors For Working Through Conflict

These specific behaviors are important to review and agree upon <u>before</u> entering into controversy. Vestries or other groups may wish to include some of these in a written Behavioral Covenant, and/or to post them in their meeting room for reference.

1. Focus on issues, not on persons.

2. Speak for yourself, not for others (not "some people say...").

3. Describe behavior as you observe it, not as you interpret it.

4. Explore and respect differing experiences of the same event.

5. Send "I" messages, not "you" messages ("when you say/do, *I* feel...")

6. State your feelings rather than acting them out or trying to disguise them. (Remember that your own feelings and those of others are real, valid, and must be expressed and respected. Feelings are never "right" or "wrong" – they simply <u>are</u>.)

7. Acknowledge your share in creating the tension or conflict.

8. Use active listening:
   - Don't interrupt.
   - Respond by asking for clarification or showing understanding of the other before stating your ideas.
   - Show you hear and understand even if you don't agree.

9. Challenge other's behaviors or ideas, *not* their motives or their worth.

10. Don't blame, label or threaten others.

11. Ask, "What's the best thing which could come out of this? What's the worst thing?"

12. Evaluate in terms of "costs and benefits" rather than "good and evil".

13. Search first for and explore common ground instead of stating positions which polarize. What common interests and concerns do you have regarding the issue being discussed?

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Handout 3

A Process For Managing Differences Effectively

A. Before discussing controversial issues, engage participants in identifying and agreeing upon behaviors they will use (and not use). (If you already have a Behavioral Covenant, skip this step.) Post these, refer to them, and agree to support each other in following them. (See examples of behaviors in Handout 2.)

B. Use an <u>interest-based problem solving process</u>.

1. Include all those most closely involved in the controversy in <u>defining the problem:</u> Ask participants to describe the issue as they see it and get agreement on WHAT the issue or problem is. (This may take time if people have different perspectives.) Write out the issue as a <u>workable problem statement</u> which is:

   a. Specific and descriptive,
   b. Free of blame,
   c. Respectful of all parties involved,
   d. Dealing with the present, not the past, and
   e. Agreed to by all participants as a statement of this problem.

2. Explore the issue:

   a. Search for common ground instead of stating positions which polarize.
   b. Ask, "what's the best/worst thing that could come out of this issue?"
   c. Discover underlying interests – what participants really need and *why*.

3. Brainstorm as many problem-solving options as possible.

4. Evaluate options in terms of "costs and benefits," not "good and bad."

5. Decide on an option or combination of options for a solution to which all can agree. (Initially these may be just next steps toward a solution. That's ok!)

6. Work out a plan for carrying out the next steps or implementing the solution, clearly identifying who will do what, when. (You may need to meet again – once or several times.)

7. Decide when and how to evaluate to see if the solution is working.

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Handout 4

Five Levels Of Conflict
And Some Interventions Through Low Level III
(Adapted from Speed B. Leas, The Alban Institute)

Level I: Problem To Solve

Summary Description

- **Objective**: Solve the problem rationally
- **Language**: Specific, clear
- **Problem**: Can be defined
- **Focus**: On problem
- **Environment**: Open
- **Tone**: Rational

Characteristics

- Real differences of opinion: conflicting goals, values, needs
- Problem defined
- Problem oriented vs. person oriented
- Language used tends to be specific and clear
- Increased risk taking between parties
- General openness about the problem
- Belief that rational methods and solutions available

Interventions for Leaders

- Work at lowest possible levels of organization (i.e., those directly involved in the differences of opinion).
- Encourage participation.
- Engage in collaborative problem solving.
    - Mutually define problem – write a Workable Problem Statement *(see p. 4).*
    - Mutually gather data.
    - Mutually search for alternative solutions.
    - Mutually choose a solution by consensus.
- Follow up to ensure solution is implemented and evaluate its effectiveness.

Level II: Disagreement

Summary Description

- **Objective**: Self protection
- **Language**: Generalizations
- **Problem**: Less obvious
- **Focus**: Score "points"
- **Environment**: Not all data shared
- **Tone**: More emotional

Characteristics

- Stronger differences, often about less obvious conflicting goals, values, needs
- Problem difficult to clearly define
- Mixing of personalities and issues
- Beginning of distrust and personalizing problem
- Major objectives of protagonists = self-protection; come out looking good
- Language tends toward generalizations
- High emotional content to the language
- People start looking for help
- Not all data shared – some cares kept close to the chest
- Belief that compromise required to resolve issues
- Inaccuracies in the other's case pointed out more to score points than to problem solve
- Jokes have hostile edge and/or received as more than a joke
- Begins to be about power and control

Interventions for Leaders

- Work at lowest possible levels of organization (i.e., with those directly involved in the differences of opinion).
- Encourage participation.
- Engage in collaborative problem solving.
    - Mutually define problem – write a Workable Problem Statement.
    - Mutually gather data.
    - Mutually search for alternative solutions.
    - Mutually choose a solution by consensus.
- Provide training in two-way communication.
- Encourage expression of feelings in presence of others.
- Work on developing trust – sharing, openness.
- Focus on organizational unity – "higher goals," common ground.
- Keep people involved.

Level III: Contest

Summary Description

- **Objective**: Winning
- **Language**: Personal attacks
- **Problem**: Issues distorted; problem not clearly identified
- **Focus**: Forming coalitions
- **Environment**: Based on assumptions
- **Tone**: Confrontational

Characteristics

- Begin dynamics of win/lose – factions/sides form; major objective = winning
- Personal attacks substitute for problem identification
- Distortion of issues and language a major problem
- Not easy for parties to talk informally
- Emotional appeals used to influence rational thinking
- Increasingly confrontational
- Each party assumes knowledge of the others' 'real' intentions and motives

Interventions for Leaders

- ***Get expert help****!*
- 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.

Level IV: Fight/Flight

Summary Description

- **Objective**: Break the relationship
- **Language**: Hurtful, humiliating
- **Problem**: Less important than winning
- **Focus**: Principles
- **Environment**: Formation of factions
- **Tone**: Stereotyping

Characteristics

- Major objective shifts from winning to getting rid of person(s)
- Attempts to defeat are more important than attempts to solve the problem
- Factions solidified; strong leaders emerge and gain followers
- Factions solicit new members, including outsiders
- Cohesiveness of factions more important than cohesiveness of total group
- Talk is of principles and values, not issues or problems
- Images of the "other side" become stereotypes
- Integrity impugned
- Parties attempt to expel each other from the organization
- Some people leave

Interventions for Leaders

- ***Get expert help!***

Level V: Intractable

Summary Description

- **Objective**: Destroy the other
- **Language**: Vengeful, bitter
- **Problem**: Personalities become issues
- **Focus**: Eternal cause, unambiguous principles
- **Environment**: Formation of ideological groups
- **Tone**: Any means justified by the ends

Characteristics

- No longer clear understanding of issues; personalities = issue
- Conflict now unmanageable
- Major objective = elimination and/or destruction of the other
- People hurt, vengeful and bitter
- More people leave
- A "break" occurs; may take years to heal

Interventions for Leaders

- ***Get expert help!***

Conflict Module II
Handout 5

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

Scenario

Mary Martin has been rector of St. Helen's Episcopal Church about two years. It's her first rectorate. She and the music director, George Johnson, decide to introduce a second hymnal for use in worship services. They currently use only the standard Episcopal hymnal and want to add more variety to the music by using a new, more contemporary hymnal as a supplement. Because St Helen's congregation is becoming more multi-cultural, Mary and George particularly like the music from other cultures which is included in the new hymnal.

At the next choir rehearsal, George circulates a copy of the proposed new hymnal to members and asks for comments. Most younger members are enthusiastic and eager to use it. Several older members express reservations and believe older members of the congregation may share their feelings. However, after discussion they agree to try the new hymnal on a trial basis and see how it's received by the congregation.

Excited, Mary and George meet with the church's Music and Liturgy Committee, show them the new hymnal, describe its virtues, and tell the committee that the choir has decided to use it as a supplement to the current hymnal. There is enough money in the music budget to buy copies for choir and worshippers. A couple of committee members are reluctant, but they agree to go along with the majority of the committee, which is willing to give the new hymnal a try.

Because she doesn't need Vestry approval to use previously budgeted music funds to buy the hymnals, Mary authorizes George to go ahead and place the order. At the next Vestry meeting, Mary passes around a copy of the new hymnal and happily announces its purchase and intended use. She says the hymnal has the full support of the choir and Music and Liturgy Committee. A younger member of the choir is also a Vestry member and shares his enthusiasm for the hymnal. After looking at it, members express responses ranging from very supportive to resistant. Long time parishioner Mrs. Skinner is more than resistant – she's indignant. "This is not Episcopal music! People like the old hymns. They're not going to want to sing all this stuff from other countries!" Mary explains that members of the congregation who came from those countries will welcome the music, and other members will enjoy learning it. A couple of Vestry members chime in to support Mrs. Skinner; others support Mary. A lively discussion ensues, but Mary has to break it off because of time constraints. "Well", she says, "it sounds like we don't have agreement about this, but let's go ahead and introduce the hymnal to the congregation and see how it goes." She moves the Vestry to its next agenda item.

In the parking lot afterwards, Mrs. Skinner and Vestry members who share her view are having what appears to be an intense conversation as Mary leaves. "Oh well", she thinks. "They'll get over it when they see how the congregation loves the new hymnal."

Epilogue

After the new hymnal was introduced to the congregation during Sunday worship, responses reflected the spectrum of those expressed by the choir, committee and Vestry. Some loved it; some hated it; and some didn't comment. Mary, George and the hymnal's supporters believed the hymnal would be fully accepted as soon as worshippers became more familiar with the hymns. Toward that end, Mary and George increased the use of new hymns. Mrs. Skinner and her group became increasingly disgruntled and vocal. Mary overheard her say, "Our rector 15 years ago tried something like that, and he didn't last long." Mary said to herself, "Well, that was *then.*"

Four months later, the tension in Sunday services at St Helen's is palpable. Some people don't partake of the Eucharist. Some long-time members refuse to use the new hymnal. Attendance of both long-time and newer members has dropped at both services. A member recently told Mary in confidence that Mrs. Skinner is telling people both George and she should leave because "they're splitting the congregation," and some members agree.

Vestry meetings have become tense and less productive. Members snap at each other over relatively unimportant matters and can't reach consensus. Anger toward other members is expressed, sometimes in hurtful ways. Mrs. Skinner has become more dogmatic and says, "See? I told you the new hymnal was a big mistake!" She barely speaks to Mary or George.

Choir morale is very low. Some members grumble, "I knew this wasn't going to work." Supporters of the new hymnal feel hurt and unappreciated by the congregation. George, an excellent musician with other job options, is seriously considering resigning.

Mary is hurt, angry at Mrs. Skinner and her group, and baffled. "Where did all this awful behavior come from – this is just about a *hymnal.* What did I do wrong? Where's the Gospel in all this? "

Questions for Small Group Discussion

1. Based on your experience, what familiar elements of church conflict do you recognize in this story?

2. Review descriptions of the Conflict Levels. What level is the conflict described in the Epilogue? Why?

3. What were some of the causes of the conflict's escalation? (Remember the causes of conflict described in Conflict Module I, as well.)

4. What might Mary,George, and members of the choir, committee and vestry each have done differently to achieve a more positive outcome?

5. What should the Rector and other congregational leaders do _now_?