

WHY A KIT ON CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT?

As Christians, we are called to live in right relationship. At the same time, God has given us a wealth of diversity – diverse backgrounds, diverse opinions, diverse needs. Eventually, these opinions and needs are going to come into conflict and we will have disagreements. For most of us, that can cause discomfort both within ourselves and also between us and others in the congregation. Very few people like to talk about conflict let alone experience it! At the same time, how a congregation journeys through conflict can be one of the defining marks of that ministry’s effectiveness. If we accept that conflict is natural and deal with it directly and compassionately, allowing it to change us and help us grow as a church, it’s likely that we won’t even think about it when we look back at our time together. We will likely remember the impact our ministry has had – on us and the community around us. When disagreements are not handled in a healthy way, though, they can quickly become the defining memory of our experience together as a congregation.

So, what is conflict?

Conflict is many different things to different people. There is no one definition. Some define conflict as:

- **A sharp disagreement, as of interests or ideas.¹;**
- **A situation in which two or more human beings desire goals which they perceive as being attainable by one or the other but not both.²; or,**
- **Whenever two or more ideas are in the same place at the same time.**

These certainly describe conflict. However, they don’t necessarily speak to the fact that conflicts happen within relationships and that this is key. The transformative mediation philosophy describes conflict as: **“A crisis in human interaction.”** Conflict definitely has a great impact on the quality of our human relationships. At the same time, some may believe that not all conflict includes a “crisis in human interaction.” The state of human interaction, however, is key in any conflict. For the purposes of this kit, let’s consider conflict to be: **the presence of differing ideas or views to the point of causing a deterioration in the quality of peoples’ relationships.**

Why disagreeing is good for the church!

- We need diverse viewpoints and opinions in order to be a dynamic and ever-evolving, ever-changing relevant community of faith. A church without healthy conflict quickly becomes a dying church.
- Conflict fosters creativity and is necessary for personal and social development.
- Conflict teaches us important lessons about ourselves personally and as a congregation.
- When relationships move through a time of conflict in a healthy way, they often become deeper and stronger. As well, moving successfully through a time of division can also help to deepen our relationship with God and our faith as a Christian.
- Constructive conflict provides opportunities for growth, new understanding and, ultimately, transformation.

Conflict is neither good nor bad – just inevitable.

Unknown

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Having said that, the cost of destructive conflict is high.

When congregations and the people within them are not well equipped or choose not to respond to conflict in a healthy, constructive way, conflict becomes destructive and can lead to broken relationships and mistrust, an ineffective ministry and, ultimately, the breakdown of the church. Some other costs...

- personal stress for members, clergy and other staff;
- the diversion of time and energy of church leadership from the ministry to dealing with the conflict;
- reduced participation in worship and church life due to tension and disillusionment;
- reduced participation in congregational decision-making which results in reduced buy-in to the decisions that are made by others;
- reduced givings as people withdraw;
- people leave the church. A 2006 study in the U.S. found that: 4 in 10 ministers left their congregation due to conflict (resulting in the expense of a church calling a new pastor, including interviews and moving expenses); church lay leaders leave a third of the time; one third of the churches experienced a drop in attendance due to the conflicts they had experienced.ⁱⁱⁱ
- If conflict is allowed to escalate, it can lead to costly interventions and even legal action.

So, let's disagree well!

One way to foster constructive conflict within congregations is to better equip ourselves to respond effectively to disagreements when they do arise. In this way we will be more likely to avoid the unhealthy consequences, spend far less time and energy responding, and more time carrying out the ministry to which we are called. This kit is just one tool representing Bay of Quinte Conference's goal to assist congregations in responding to conflict in a healthy, life-giving, transformative way.

- ✓ Please feel free to photocopy this kit in whatever way is helpful for your congregation;
- ✓ Please add this kit to whatever resources your council/board/session and M&P committee get at the beginning of each year;
- ✓ Please share this kit, or pieces of it, with general members of the congregation in whatever way you feel would be helpful;
- ✓ If your church leadership or congregation is interested in facilitated workshops to continue to build tools and responses to conflict, please contact the Alternate Dispute Resolution Committee through the Executive Secretary:

execsec@bayofquinteconference.ca, 613-967-0150

Please...read on!!

ⁱ Webster's New World Dictionary, Pocket Books, 1995.

ⁱⁱ Larry L. McSwain and William C. Treadwell, Jr., *Conflict Ministry in the Church* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1981), 3

ⁱⁱⁱ Church Conflict (Part 2), John C. LaRue, Jr., <http://www.christianitytoday.com/yc/2006/001/9.80.html>

EVEN CHRISTIANS DISAGREE... AND THAT'S GOOD!

Conflict can be a positive force for growth and needed change.

A church without conflict is a dying church. Really! Without different ideas and differences of opinion, we remain stagnant in our congregations – we don't grow as individual Christians or congregations and the church finds itself dying. Congregations must continually change and grow in order to remain vital in their ministries. This means embracing the diversity that God has blessed us with. And, diversity leads to conflict...which leads to growth...which leads to change...which leads to renewed ministry. We need conflict!! Having said that, we know that moving through conflict can feel uncomfortable, even nasty, and can lead to divisions within the congregation and the ending of relationships. If responded to in a healthy and effective way, however, congregations – and those within them – can experience the positive aspects of conflict as well, including renewed energy and life.

“The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers.”

Scott Peck

A few general points about conflict:

- ✦ Conflict is a natural occurrence within all relationships and organizations. There will always be conflict in our lives.
- ✦ Conflict isn't bad or good. It's neutral. How we respond to conflict, however, can be positive or negative and can set the course for the ultimate outcome – positive growth or broken relationships.
- ✦ Conflict management is a skill which can be learned.
- ✦ Conflict generally builds up bit by bit. So, it is very important to deal with conflicts as they arise. It usually develops over time with a particular incident triggering it to come out into the open.
- ✦ We don't always create conflict, but we *always* choose our response to it.



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CONGREGATIONAL CONFLICT WITHIN RIGHT RELATIONSHIP: THE CONTEXT OF OUR CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

Some underlying principles we believe, as Christians, about conflict*:

- ✦ that all people are created in the image of God and are valuable and worthy of respect and love.
- ✦ That God calls us to a common vision of Shalom (right relationship). We are called to restore broken relationship, even making things better than before.
- ✦ That diversity in creation and humanity is a gift from God and enriches us even if we might find living with diversity sometimes a challenge.
- ✦ That conflict is a spiritual issue. When addressed in a healthy way, conflict can provide new growth, understanding and transformation.
- ✦ That conflict is destructive when it leads to exclusion, wounded self-esteem, broken relationships, loss of the sense of well-being, alienation, distrust, undue stress, misunderstanding, violence and abuse. Harm and violation are contrary to God's will.
- ✦ That to love one another during conflict is particularly challenging, but is also the essence of our faith.

We believe in the movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst, reminding us that we can trust that the conflict and pain need not be the end, but part of the spiritual journey which can lead to places of wholeness and health for the people and congregations involved.

WHAT'S A CONGREGATIONAL COVENANT? AND, WHY SHOULD WE CONSIDER ONE?

As a congregation, we want to welcome differences of opinion and even conflict as a means of helping us to be creative in reaching solutions and decisions to the issues we face. If there is no healthy disagreement, there is a high likelihood that our congregation will become stagnant and our ministry less effective than we would desire. We want conflict! However, we want it to be healthy conflict. One way to help our disagreements enrich our community is to be clear about how we will be together in community in terms of our interactions with each other – our behaviour and communication – especially in times of conflict. A congregational covenant can help us do that.

A congregational covenant provides a framework for how the community will interact with each other. It outlines the values of the group using a common language that has been agreed upon by those within the congregation and identifies positive norms and manners that help the group function as a healthy community. These are not just “rules” that, if broken, are “punished.” These are promises made to each other to adhere to positive ways of being and behaving together in order to live effectively as a community of God – even in times of conflict. The covenant also identifies the community’s response in times when the promises are not kept.

Congregational covenants are integrated into the everyday life and functioning of the community (e.g. by posting them in each room; referring to the covenant at the beginning of meetings; etc.) until the covenant becomes a part of the very fabric of the group. They can be used to check into how the congregation is functioning together – a barometer of the health of the community – and can also be used by church leaders as an indication of the behaviours and communication they should be modelling. Above all, a congregational covenant is a reflection of – and extension of – the congregation’s relationship with God.

How to Create a Congregational Covenant (the abridged version!):

- The entire process is placed within the context of a community that worships together. Worship forms a part of each step in the process.
- The congregation is gathered to explore what they feel is important for being together in community in a healthy and life-giving way (what norms are important; behaviours; manners; how to respond in times of conflict; etc.). The process may include more than one gathering and/or other ways of involving people such as including a short questionnaire in the bulletin, discussions during committee/group meetings, conversations during Sunday School, choir, etc.
- The feedback is gathered and out of that feedback the first draft of the covenant is created (usually by a small committee).
- The draft goes to the congregation using many means (bulletin; committee meetings; etc.) for further feedback.
- The covenant is revised. The “feedback/revision” part of the process can be done as often as needed, until it is felt that the covenant reflects the consensus of the congregation.
- The covenant can then be taken to the congregation for their commitment to the promises outlined in it. It can be particularly effective to include this part within a service of worship.
- The covenant is integrated into the life and work of the church and is held up continually as promises made to one another as a community of faith.

***Based on the work of Gil Rendle in, Behavioural Covenants...**

CREATING A CONGREGATIONAL COVENANT... ...AN EXAMPLE

This Covenant states the values that we wish to reflect in all our relationships within the Christian community of Red Deer Lake United Church. This includes relationships among and between congregants, leaders and staff, and others with whom we may be in conversation because we are members and adherents of this congregation.

Caring for each other

*We seek to develop ways of relating to each other that are consistent with the love and compassion lived and taught by Jesus. For us, this means going beyond ourselves to act for others in the community in supportive and caring ways.

Communication

*Living as Christians in community means treating one another with respect, honesty and openness, whether in agreement or disagreement. *We shall strive to be as willing to listen as we are to speak. In our communication, as we build relationships with one another, we will speak from an "I" position without blaming others. *We will be respectful in our speech and in our responses to one another. *We shall do our best to refrain from gossip and offhand or intentional critical comments about a third party in the presence of others. *We will use email communication with care, and refrain from using it in areas of sensitivity and criticism.

Meetings: Committee, Council, and Congregation

*In our committee meetings and congregational meetings, we will seek to be as concerned about how we conduct meetings, communicate with each other and make decisions, as we are about the issues. *We expect that our leaders will consider the opinions of the wider congregation in making decisions, but will also be cognizant of the need for leadership in decisionmaking. *We expect that our leaders will keep the congregation informed through frequent and open communication, forums and other ways of staying in touch. *We expect that leaders will honour the confidentiality of their office. *In all meetings, we will encourage the use of due process when taking initiatives or making decisions. *On a regular basis, at the end of meetings of committees, mission teams and Council, we will review how well we have honoured the Covenant.

Outreach

*We believe that welcoming newcomers is a spiritual task which belongs to us all. We commit ourselves to this task. *As a Christian congregation, we understand our context to be the community, the nation and the world. We will seek to speak and to act as citizens of the larger community.

In Disagreement

*We honour diversity and the uniqueness of each individual. *When we encounter change with which we disagree, we will first address our concern with the appropriate person or group. *We recognize that conflict is natural and we will view it as an opportunity for growth. *When conflict arises, we will acknowledge that it exists; we will approach it fearlessly; we will address it respectfully and in a timely manner; we will seek resolution in positive, nonadversarial ways. *When we are in disagreement with another person, we will make use of the wisdom of the Covenant Toward Reconciliation (2006) in order to address the disagreement in a healthy way that honours the individuals and the community. *When we feel we must speak "our truth" to another person, we will, as the scripture says, "speak the truth in love." *We trust that when congregants do not agree with decisions made, respectful expression of dissenting opinions will be accepted, and that those who disagree will try to find ways to continue to support the community. *Where that is not possible, we will conduct ourselves in a manner that will not adversely affect the community or our own integrity.

Personal Responsibility and Power

*We realize that the life and mission of the congregation is the collective responsibility of all. Therefore we will offer our share of support, in presence, finances and gifts of time and ability. *We celebrate the use of personal power and influence for the empowerment of others and for the development and implementation of community goals. *We will strive to use our power in ways that respect individuals and the community, leaving room for the participation of others. *We will make use of due process when taking initiatives or making decisions.

General

*We will govern and conduct ourselves in ways that are consistent with the ethos and the polity of the United Church of Canada.

SOME PARTICULAR CONTRIBUTORS TO CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH...*

Identity conflict: It's not just about the budget line!

Peoples' faith beliefs and spiritual commitments are central to their psychological and emotional identity. Therefore, disagreements over, say, the budget are often not just disagreements over the budget! Differences can be taken very personally as attacks on personal beliefs or character. For instance, a disagreement over the line in the budget allocating money to the youth program may bring up peoples' spiritual beliefs around the importance of Jesus' call to "let the children come unto me", and set up a dynamic where people feel like the church (or certain people within it) are challenging their spiritual beliefs.

We are often accomplices to difficult and inappropriate behaviour.

People in churches, in order to "be Christian", often permit, if not encourage or enable, inappropriate behaviour. We are not well-trained in how to confront people compassionately and name inappropriate behaviour while also being loving. Congregation members and leadership may placate or appease inappropriate behaviour in order to keep the peace. This leads to an ongoing cycle of active conflict (while the behaviour is "out there") and inactive conflict (following appeasement, things settle down) which leads to active conflict again.

Keeping the peace for the sake of "togetherness".

Congregations are filled with people who choose to be together in order to worship, undertake social justice outreach activities, as well as learn and socialize together. Some churches value fellowship and togetherness above much else. In many cases, church members refuse to "make waves" in order to maintain the "togetherness" of the congregation.

Christians – and church -- should be perfect! Shouldn't they?

Our expectations for church life often exceed those placed on other areas of our life. We bring our highest goals, values, priorities, and expectations to our church. When those expectations are not met, and we are disappointed, there is increased pressure for the church – the minister, the musicians, other congregation members – to meet our unmet needs and relieve our disappointment.

There are challenges to being a voluntary organization.

For the most part, the church is a voluntary organization. Often, in voluntary organizations, because people are giving of their time and talents, inappropriate behaviour goes unrecognized or unchallenged. Voluntary organizations can also lend themselves to concentrations or abuse of power (eg. A church board comprised of four members; two of whom were husband and wife – the treasurer and chair – and who held co-signing authority on all cheques. All meetings were conducted in their home. They ran the nomination process and were always re-elected by acclamation.)

*Based on the work of Arthur Paul Boers in *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior*. Please see "Want to Learn More?" for more information.

SOME PARTICULAR CONTRIBUTORS TO CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH...

A concentration of power for some leads to the exclusion of others.

Where there are concentrations of power in a congregation, others are necessarily excluded from having influence or power in church processes. This can lead to a lack of 'buy-in' in congregational decisions and, therefore, conflict.

There are challenges to being a small organization.

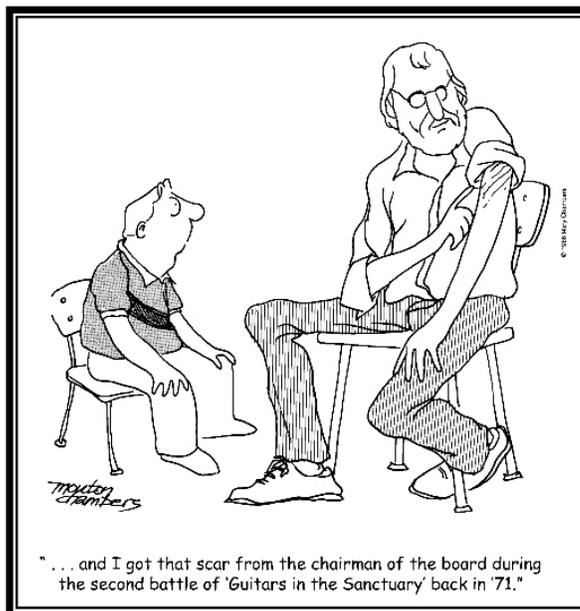
For smaller congregations, inappropriate behaviour may go unchallenged, and conflicts unresolved, for fear of having members withdraw financial or volunteer support. As well, conflicts in smaller organizations or churches "are like puddles: each wave of conflict, upset, or controversy washes over and affects everyone, muddying issues, and leaving all feeling sullied." This can also happen, of course, in larger congregations. However, the effects of the conflict can be dispersed over a wider population, easing the impact. That's not to say, though, that large congregations may not spend copious amounts of time and energy dealing with conflict. The effects in a larger congregation are a bit different, however.

The eternal stakes...

In congregations which hold to eternal salvation beliefs, conflicts may be raised to the level of taking on eternal proportions. If there is a conflict around theology, members may be convinced that eternal salvation is at stake: their own, their children's, or the church's. This can escalate a conflict to very unhealthy proportions.

Churches often challenge the status quo.

The Gospel calls on Christians to challenge the status quo in society and work to bring personal and social transformation. Doing this generates emotional reactions and differences of opinion and, thus, conflict – either within the congregation or between the church and the surrounding community.



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IDENTIFYING THE LEVELS OF CONFLICT*: SOME STRATEGIES FOR CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Why is it important for us to understand what level a conflict is at? Although some responses remain consistent throughout all of the levels (i.e. using good communication techniques), some of the other steps taken for a conflict at Level 1 (really considered to be a problem or a challenge) or Level 2 may be very different than for a conflict that has reached Levels 3, 4 or 5. As a leader within the congregation, one of the first things we need to do when confronted with disagreement is establish what level it's at and choose our next steps accordingly.

Level One: A Problem to Solve	
What to look for:	Some helpful strategies:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *The goal of the group is to work out a solution to the problem, whatever it is. *Anger may surface, but the focus remains on finding an amicable resolution. *The conflict isn't "personal" or "person-oriented" (it's not about peoples' personalities or behaviours but about the issue at hand). *Communication is open; people speak directly to each other; language used is straightforward, specific and focused in the present. *People do not withhold information and there are no hidden agendas. 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Healthy resolution at this level is likely with regular conflict resolution and decision-making techniques.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Collaborative Problem Solving Processes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the group mutually defines the problem - the group mutually gathers information to broaden understanding - the group mutually searches for solutions - the group mutually chooses one solution by consensus and agrees on follow-up *Follow the already-established processes of the church (e.g. Manual; by-laws; etc.)
Level Two: Disagreement	
What to look for:	Some helpful strategies:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *The goal becomes enmeshed with a need for some self-protection ("I'm going to be cautious."; "I'm not going to share fully what I know.") *Shift from openness to some guardedness. *Not overtly hostile, but you may begin to see the emergence of sarcastic overtones in language used. *Individuals move away from dealing with specifics toward generalizations. *Individuals frequently turn to compromise to deal with differences. 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Healthy resolution at this level is likely with regular conflict resolution techniques.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Collaborative Problem Solving Processes, framed as working toward a "win-win" solution *Encourage participation in the problem-solving (many people begin to withdraw at this point) *Empower participants to act; allow processes to help them express their feelings to others and be heard *If one doesn't already exist, establish a congregational covenant around communication and behaviour *reiterate/teach good communication skills *leadership models the types of communication and interactions that are helpful. Follow the already-established processes of the church (e.g. Manual; by-laws; etc.)

*Based on the work of Kenneth C. Haug in *Antagonists in the Church* and *Speed Leas in Moving Your Church Through Conflict*. Please see the "Want to learn more?" resource sheet for more information.

IDENTIFYING THE LEVELS OF CONFLICT: SOME STRATEGIES FOR CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Level Three: A Contest	
What to look for:	Some helpful responses:
<p>*Goal becomes winning rather than solving the problem or even self-protection (“You must accept my solution.”).</p> <p>*Language used reveals some perceptual distortion (vague; overstated – “Everyone feels that...” “They’re never going to change...”) and divides people into “us/them” terms.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Healthy resolution at this level is possible with regular conflict resolution techniques. However, assistance may be required.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Create opportunities for training in communication skills and healthy conflict resolution *Engage in activities to establish a greater sense of trust *Revisit or establish healthy conflict norms (generally outlined in a congregational covenant) *Engage in a structured process for problem-solving/decision-making: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - groundrules - clear decision-making processes - collaborative problem-solving - framed as working toward meeting everyone’s needs, if possible *Help people identify their interests and needs *Create opportunities for people to express their feelings. *Attempt to find common goals within the congregation unrelated to the conflict to allow people to focus their attention on working together. *Decision-making processes (even if non-consensual): should be slow and intentional so that anyone affected has the opportunity to participate and effect the final outcome; should be bound by the legal norms of the congregation (manual; church by-laws; etc.); should be fair and transparent (e.g. public minutes) when appropriate. * Seek external support through Presbytery or the Conference office, if necessary.
Level Four: Fight or Flight	
What to look for:	Some helpful responses:
<p>*Goal is to prove “rightness”, hurt opponents, get rid of them or both. The good of the church is not a concern at this level (although the language used may word it that way).</p> <p>*Language used appeals to generalized and personalized principles (e.g. truth, freedom, justice, etc.). Individuals avoid the specific issue(s) at hand.</p> <p>* Choices have crystallized into either fighting or fleeing.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Healthy resolution of most conflicts at this level will require assistance.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Seek external support through Presbytery or the Conference office. *Follow the already-established processes of the church. *Help communication amongst participants by third-party communication, when appropriate. This may be helpful when those communications are reframed in a positive way that helps move people toward understanding. This is most successful when there is a clear issue present. If distrust or dislike is the issue, then this type of communication is not advised. *Agree to appropriate behaviours and adhere to agreed-upon outcomes when people break that agreement. *Attempt joint decision-making in a consensual, collaborative way, but also understand that the likelihood of reaching agreement this way is likely small. *Understand that there may be people who leave the church at this stage and this may, in fact, be healthy (although it is always sad to lose people, it is not always unhealthy).
Level Five: Intractable Situations (“Conflict run amok”)	
What to look for:	Some helpful responses:
<p>*Goal is to destroy opponents, irrespective of cost to self or others (e.g. group in the congregation don’t just want the minister to leave, but want to make sure he’s never hired anywhere else.)</p> <p>*Language is framed in terms of morality.</p>	<p>Healthy resolution of conflicts at this level will require external, professional assistance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Seek external support through Presbytery or the Conference office.

We Need Conflict...No, really!!

As Christians, we are called by God to live in right relationship. At the same time, God has given humanity a wealth of diversity – diverse backgrounds, diverse opinions, diverse needs. What happens to right relationship when those opinions and needs clash in our own congregations? Does conflict mean we're not living in right relationship? Hardly!

The reality is that there will always be disagreements in our congregations – and there should be! A church with no conflict quickly loses its ability to learn, be creative and grow as a community. We *need* conflict to help us continually evolve as congregations and be effective in our ministries. In the end, it's not whether or not we disagree that shows if we're living in right relationship. It's *how* we disagree.

Even Jesus talked about how to respond when we're in conflict with each other (our translation!):

- a) **Go and speak gently and respectfully** to the person and see if you can resolve it.
- b) If that doesn't work, **take a wise person with you** (maybe someone from the Board/Council or the minister) and try again.
- c) If that doesn't work, take it to the church. Here, we don't mean (and we don't think Jesus meant!) sharing your conflict from the pulpit! **Ask your Ministry and Personnel Committee or your Board/Council for help** in resolving the matter. They can tap into resources available within the Conference to help people move through conflict in a healthy way.

We hope you'll take advantage of these valuable resources so that your congregation can move through conflict honestly and effectively, leading to new growth and a dynamic ministry.

What is the Alternate Dispute Resolution Committee (ADRC)?

The Alternate Dispute Resolution Committee was founded in order to help administrate the United Church's Alternate Dispute Policy which came into being in 1999. Since then, the mandate of the committee has been expanded to include the administration and implementation of conflict resolution processes across the Conference including:

- Finding skilled people within the Conference to take on the various roles needed to help congregations journey through conflict;
- Publicizing and implementing the Alternate Dispute Resolution policy, including encouraging congregations to make use of the resources it provides earlier in the conflicts they experience;
- Finding ways to prevent unhealthy conflict within congregations:
 - Working on changing the culture within churches to invite healthy conflict as a needed and vibrant part of congregational life;
 - Offering training to congregations and church committees/leadership at the congregational, Presbytery and Conference levels in all aspects of effectively responding to conflict when it arises;
 - Working on systemic changes to provide a basis for healthy conflict in the church.

The ADRC is comprised of two staff people from the Conference office, as well as a mix of ministry personnel and lay people. We're always looking for people who are interested in supporting this area of work. If you're one of those people – please let us know!!

What's a Conflict Resolution Facilitator?

A Conflict Resolution Facilitator (CRF) is a trained, impartial mediator who can help people in conflict talk through the issues, express very difficult emotions in an appropriate way (a way that will be heard by the other person) and work toward a solution. The CRF does not make decisions for the people involved in the conflict – he or she only helps those people make their own decisions. As well, the CRF is not an arbitrator or investigator. He or she will not “pass judgement” on the parties. Rather, the CRF helps to facilitate the conversation in a way that works to build understanding and problem-solving.

Often, churches wait until a conflict has become very unhealthy for those involved and the congregation before calling on a CRF or others for assistance. However, CRFs can be made available at all levels of a conflict – whenever the people involved, or leadership in the church, feels that their type of facilitation and/or advice might be helpful. We would encourage congregations to call on this resource as early as possible in a conflict in order to have the greatest chance of finding an effective way forward.

The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers.”

Scott Peck

What's a Right Relationship Facilitator?

A Right Relationship Facilitator (RRF) is trained and available to help congregations that have already journeyed through some sort of conflict process (mediation; review; formal complaint ; etc.) begin the process of rebuilding trust and community together.

After some sort of resolution has been reached or decision made, the RRF continues the journey with the congregation, in partnership with the serving minister, using different forms of worship, ritual, and other processes, to help people move through any grief, sorrow or anger they may still be feeling and let go of whatever is holding them back from fully moving into the future. The RRF could also work with the congregation to help them establish what other practical steps might best be taken in order to help the congregation heal.

We believe in the movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst, reminding us that we can trust that the conflict and pain need not be the end, but part of the spiritual journey which can lead to places of wholeness and health for the people and congregations involved.

The Team Approach to Accompanying a Congregation in Conflict

For times when conflicts in a congregation are very complex (involving many parties and many issues) or involve sufficient numbers of people within the congregation to have a negative impact on the day-to-day functioning of the church, the Presbytery may choose to ask a team of support people to journey with that congregation from beginning to end. This approach helps the congregation form a relationship with the people that are supporting them rather than having three or four people “parachute” into the congregation, undertake their part of the process and then leave again. The team could be made up of a support person from Pastoral Oversight (and, if appropriate, Pastoral Relations), a CRF, and an RRF. The composition of the team would change from one situation to the next (every conflict is different). The entire team would maintain a supportive relationship with the church throughout the entire resolution and healing process.

How to Access Support and Training for Your Congregation

If you have a disagreement in your congregation that you think might benefit from these types of support or if you would like to increase your congregation's capacity for working through conflict in a healthy way, please contact:

Executive Secretary
Bay of Quinte Conference
(613) 967-0150
execsec@bayofquinteconference.ca

**...even
when we
disagree!**



RIGHT RELATIONSHIP FACILITATOR

A TEAM MODEL FOR JOURNEYING WITH CONGREGATIONS IN CONFLICT...

Our Approach in the Past:

Until now, whenever assistance has been called upon for helping a congregation walk through a difficult conflict, it has involved a number of resource people or groups of people generally “parachuting” into the congregation at different times within the same conflict. For instance, one person or a team from Pastoral Oversight or Pastoral Relations might do a visit or respond to a situation, someone or a team might undertake a J8 or J9 review, a Conflict Resolution Facilitator might be asked to undertake a mediation, and then someone might work with the congregation in the aftermath to begin the healing process – all within the same conflict.

Why change our approach?

For many conflicts (e.g. those that only involve one or two people or are less divisive in nature), our approach in the past has been and will continue to be effective. However, feedback received through the years has led us to believe that a more effective and pastoral approach for larger conflicts will be to establish a team of two to four trained resource people to journey with the congregation from the beginning of the conflict to the end. In this way, the team establishes a relationship with the congregation at the start and that relationship continues throughout the process, rather than having different people “pop” in and out of the process as it goes along.

The “Team” Approach

The new team approach will be based on principles such as, but not included to:

- A commitment to a journey of transformation;
- An emphasis on healing and congregational wellness;
- Available pastoral support for all involved;
- Support is given at the earliest stage possible within the situation;
- Fair and transparent processes that include elements of accountability;
- Processes that include broader education and skills-building in order to prevent unhealthy conflict in the future.

The team would be made up of those resource people who would be most helpful and would change according to the particular situation (every conflict is different). It could consist of:

- one person from Pastoral Oversight who would act as the communication coordinator for the team;
- a Conflict Resolution Facilitator (CRF) (mediator);
- a Right Relationship Facilitator (RRF) (someone trained to work with a congregation following any sort of conflict process to begin to reknit community, heal and move toward congregational wellness);
- a person from Pastoral Relations (if the situation involves the minister);
- or, others as identified by Presbytery or by the team.

A TEAM MODEL FOR JOURNEYING WITH CONGREGATIONS IN CONFLICT...

What would the team do?

When an appropriate conflict situation becomes known, Presbytery Executive would pull the team together, in conjunction with appropriate Conference staff, based on a list of resource-people held at the Conference offices. The team would work together and with the congregation to: *Diagnose the situation; *Make decisions on what processes would best help the congregation; *Carry out those processes themselves (i.e. CRF would do a mediation; RRF would do follow-up) or call in others, if necessary (i.e. for a J8 or J9 review); *Ensure pastoral care is available if needed; *Make recommendations to Presbytery for follow-up.

What types of situations would best benefit from the team approach?

- A team could be called in at any level of a conflict or disagreement from a problem-solving level (e.g. perhaps the congregation is trying to make a very difficult, divisive decision around church mission or church policy and needs support in having a healthy conversation around it) to a situation that requires mediation (higher levels of conflict).
- The situation should involve sufficient numbers of congregation members to have a negative impact on the day-to-day life of the church. For instance, a conflict involving only the minister and the organist would likely not require a team's intervention (as long as it stays that way!).
- The complexity of the situation is such that one person (usually a CRF) would have insufficient time, resources, etc., to sufficiently work through all of the issues alone and/or the situation requires more than one approach (e.g. mediation; trauma work; decision-making facilitation; healing; etc.).

How can your church access a team or other Conference resources for assistance in journeying through a conflict?

- **Contact the Secretary or Chairperson of your Presbytery
OR**
- **Contact the Executive Secretary of Conference at
execsec@bayofquinteconference.ca or 613-967-0150**

CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH? SOME TIPS FOR RESPONDING...

Some helpful steps for moving through conflict:

- Speak privately and compassionately to the individual(s) with whom you're in conflict. Although conflict can make us feel uncomfortable and it may be difficult to bring ourselves to go directly to the person we're disagreeing with, often these conversations can resolve the conflict very early on and restore (and even enhance!) our relationships.
- If direct communication has taken place and you feel the conflict hasn't been resolved, you can approach the leadership in your congregation (e.g. the chair of your governance body; someone from the Ministry and Personnel Committee; etc.) to assist you in having a further conversation with the person(s) (it's often helpful to have a third party present to help people hear each other) or, failing that, to assist in finding other ways to resolve the conflict.
- If the conflict is still unresolved, you can approach the Chair or Secretary of Presbytery or the Executive Secretary of Conference to tap into the many resources available to congregations to help them move through conflict in a healthy way.

An (almost) humorous look at how to definitely make things WORSE!!

- × **Bypass the person you REALLY need to talk to:** Go to a friend and complain about the person you're having the conflict with and then ask that friend to go speak to the person instead of you speaking directly with him or her. This is not the same as talking the situation over with friends and getting their advice ("sounding board"). However, if you speak with your friend(s) and ask them to speak to the person for you, that's triangulation.
- × **Have Lots of Parking Lot Conversations:** Try to get as many people on your side as possible.
- × **Make Threats:** Tell people you'll leave the committee or withhold your givings, or even better, will leave the church, if the conflict isn't resolved to your liking.
- × **Don't express your feelings of anger or frustration or fear directly.** Instead, use really negative body language during meetings (or maybe during worship depending on who's there) or talk about people behind their back or find ways to block anything your adversary is trying to accomplish in the church.
- × **Don't ever tell anyone what you really need** or try to find ways to have those needs met.

How to definitely make things BETTER!!

- ✓ **Speak directly with those involved in the conflict**
- ✓ **Focus on the problem instead of on each other personally**
- ✓ **Express your feelings directly**
- ✓ **Refrain from making threats of any kind**
- ✓ **Openly discuss what your needs are and look at the options of how they might be met**

CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH? SOME TIPS FOR RESPONDING: LISTEN FIRST!!

In order to find the best way forward in times of disagreement, we need to first understand what's going on for the other person (we're usually pretty aware of what's going on for us!). That means listening!

Some barriers to effective listening:

- **Planning your response or advice** long before the person has finished speaking.
- **Assuming what is meant** ("mind-reading") – jumping quickly to what you think the person is REALLY trying to say ("He's saying this, but he really means this.")
- **Judging** – deciding that what's being said is boring, crazy, stupid, immature, hostile, etc, before the person is finished.
- **Daydreaming** – floating off into your own world and not paying attention.
- **Inserting your own personal experience** – thinking about it or sharing it before the person is finished speaking.
- **Placating** – quickly saying "okay, whatever...!" just to move onto something different.

Some tips for effective listening:

- **Stop talking!**
- **Use reflective language:** "I see"; "uh huh"; "really"; etc.
- **Make eye contact** – This doesn't mean staring! Making eye contact can let the person know that you're interested in what they're saying and that you're really listening to them. As well, you can pick-up non-verbal signals when you make eye-contact with people. A note, though: eye contact can be a culturally-based dynamic. In some cultures, direct eye contact can be considered negatively. So, we should be aware of who we're speaking with.
- **Use body language to let the speaker know you're interested** – e.g. nodding, leaning in, facial expressions that empathize with what the speaker is saying, open posture, etc.
- **Use empathetic listening** – Listen not only to the words that are being said, but the feelings behind them.
- **Reflect back** – When the speaker has finished speaking, let them know you've understood by saying something to reflect what has just been heard. E.g. "So, you're upset that I didn't clear the steps like I promised?"

CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH? SOME TIPS FOR RESPONDING: IT'S NOT WHAT YOU SAY...IT'S HOW IT'S HEARD!!

If you want someone to hear your message, it needs to be shared in a way that's going to invite them to hear it. Some tips for being heard...

Anger can be good – but not right now!

Look to your own emotions first. It's important to find a way to control our own emotions before trying to say what we need to say to the other person. If emotions are impeding your ability to communicate well, it can be a good idea to withdraw temporarily from the situation and come back to it later, when those emotions are more controlled. As well, knowing our triggers can be very helpful in allowing us to create a strategy for responding when those buttons are pushed.

Goals for communicating your message:

- Avoid the desire to punish, attack or blame. It may feel good to do it in that moment, but it is not helpful in moving the conversation forward.
- Improve the situation.
- Communicate feelings appropriately.
- Improve the relationship (if appropriate – not all conflicts happen between people who wish to maintain or improve their relationship) and improve positive communication.
- Avoid repeating the same situation (or similar).

Some Tips to Keep in Mind

It's not what you say...it's when you say it!!

They say that timing is everything. In this case, it is! Choose the time for having a difficult conversation very carefully. Is the person running out the door for work? About to chair a meeting? Ill? The more carefully you choose your timing, the more positive the result will likely be. We often feel that the conflicts we get into need to be resolved in the heat of the moment – now, now, now! However, there is always the often better option of stepping away from the conflict with the commitment to come back together and talk about it at a better time.

It's not what you say...it's where you say it!!

Where you have the conversation is just as important as when you have it.

- Keep the conversation private. Everyone prefers to “save face” when they are in a difficult situation. No one likes to be embarrassed. And, one of the biggest escalators of conflict is when other people get involved. With that in mind, try as much as possible, to keep your conversations in private with as few people involved as possible.

CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH? SOME TIPS FOR RESPONDING: IT'S NOT WHAT YOU SAY...IT'S HOW IT'S HEARD!!

- **NEVER USE EMAIL!!!** Email is a great tool for sharing information, but a lousy tool for communicating difficult emotions (even if we use smiley faces!). It's very difficult to accurately interpret the tone of the message which can lead to misunderstanding. Also, as it's not a face-to-face medium, we often feel removed and distant from the person we're communicating with and, therefore, may have a tendency to "shoot from the hip" without reflecting on how it's going to be perceived. When used, email can be a *huge* escalator for conflict. In the immortal words of Nancy Reagan – "Just Say No!!"

It's not what you say...it's how you say it!!

- Only approximately 7% of our understanding of verbal messages comes from the actual words. The rest of our understanding is taken from the tone of voice and body language. Consider how those will be perceived by the person you're speaking to and adjust them so that the other person is more likely to hear your message.
- Use "I" instead of "you": Phrases like "*You* never do this!" or "*You* are really inconsiderate!" are "you" statements and are heard as attacks. At that point, the person you're trying to reach with your message isn't listening to you openly anymore. Instead, speak from your own experience in a way that still identifies the behaviour that's having a negative impact on you, how it's making you feel, and that you'd like to find a different way of moving forward.

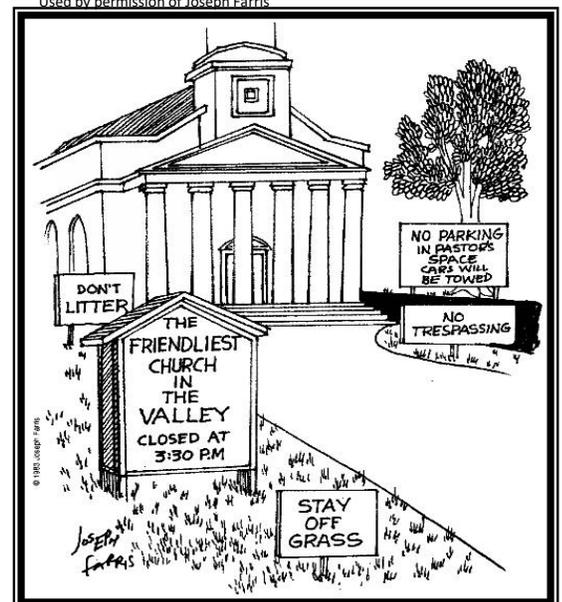
E.G. "John, I feel really frustrated when I'm interrupted (or "when you interrupt me") because then I feel like I'm not being heard and I lose my train of thought. Could you please wait until I'm finished speaking?"

Or

E.G. "Mary, I get frustrated when your clothes are left on the floor because that kind of mess really makes me feel stressed and I trip over them! Could we please talk about how we can do things differently?"

- **Use specific language:** Words like "always", "never", "everyone (feels this way)", etc., escalate conflicts. It's far more helpful to be very specific about the behaviour you're experiencing as negative. Talk about specific incidents and behaviours and not generalizations.

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WANT TO LEARN MORE? SOME RESOURCES...

Building Behavioural Covenants, Gil Rendle, The Alban Institute

Church Conflict: From Contention to Collaboration, Norma Cook Everist, Abingdon Press, 2004.

Conflict and a Christian Life, Sam Portaro, Cowley Publications, 2003.

Conflict Management in Congregations, ed. David B. Lott, The Alban Institute, 1989.

Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times, Peter L. Steinke, The Alban Institute, 2006.

Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach, Peter L. Steinke, The Alban Institute, 2006.

Healthy Disclosure: Solving Communication Quandaries in Congregations, Kibbie Simmons Ruth and Karen A. McClintock, The Alban Institute, 2007.

Hope in Conflict: Discovering Wisdom in Congregational Turmoil, David R. Sawyer, Pilgrim Press, 2007.

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

Making Peace with Conflict: Practical Skills for Conflict Transformation, ed. Carolyn Schrock-Shenk and Lawrence Ressler, Herald Press, 1991.

Managing Church Conflict, Hugh F. Halverstadt, Westminster John Knox Press, 1991.

Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior, Arthur Paul Boers, The Alban Institute, 1999.

Practicing Right Relationship: Skills for Deepening Purpose, Finding Fulfillment and Increasing Effectiveness in Your Congregation, Mary K. Sellon and Daniel P. Smith, The Alban Institute, 2005.

Understanding Your Congregation as a System, George Parsons and Speed Leas, The Alban Institute, 1993.

Welcoming Resistance, William Chris Hobgood, The Alban Institute, 2001.

On-Line Resources

The Alban Institute: www.alban.org

Appreciative Inquiry: www.appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/intro