

## Conflict in the Church: A How-To Guide

*How to engage healthy conflict and resist destructive conflict*

### Introduction to conflict: Issue Conflict as distinct from Personal Conflict

- There are two sorts of conflict: there's one where people are vigorously disagreeing over a question or a problem or a course of action; and there's another where people are beating each other up. In the first case the conflict is about an *issue*; in the second case the conflict has become *personal*.
- *Issue conflict* can be healthy and is inevitable in a congregation, just as in any other social group.
  - The only sort of congregation where there is no conflict, is a cult.
  - Conflict means that people have different ideas about things that they care about—that's a good thing!
- *Personal conflict* is not healthy and is not inevitable, and has roots in some of the classic church vices:
  - Gossip
  - Faction-building
  - Bullying or other forms of personal attack
  - Opaque or unaccountable decision making which leaves people feeling disempowered
- It's very easy for issue conflict to slip into personal conflict; you see this when the fight continues even after the initial issue is resolved, because everyone is so bruised and angry that they now see each other as enemies.

**Some bedrock principles**— these underlie all that I'll be discussing:

- There's no shame in issue conflict; sometimes, faithfulness demands that we enter into conflict. Think of Jesus taking on the money changers at the Temple, Luke 19:45.
- Conflict over issues has always been part of the life of the church. Think of the arguments over whether new Christians had first to become Jews, Acts 15.
- Conflict almost always accompanies change: someone will wish things could stay as they were. Think of the Israelites on day three of their forty year journey to the promised land, complaining that Moses brought them out of Egypt just to starve in the wilderness. Exodus 16:3. The important thing is for the conflict to be about the issue, rather than degenerate into personal attacks.
- Everyone screws up from time to time; when it's your turn, know how to apologize and be quick to make amends. Think of Jesus' admonition that if you are leaving your gift at

the altar and remember that someone has something against you, leave your gift, go be reconciled, and then come offer your gift. Matthew 5:23-24.

- Jesus didn't tell his disciples to run an efficient church; he told us to love one another as he loved us, John 15:12. It's hard to think of an argument whose results are so important that they justify treating one another badly.
- As the children's song goes, "they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love...," and in no other way.
- Personal conflict usually means that someone, or everyone, is acting in a way inconsistent with this sort of love.

So I address conflict in several different ways:

1. How to nurture a culture with a robust immunity to personal conflict
2. How to engage in issue conflict in such a way that it doesn't lead to personal attacks, faction-building, or other forms of personal conflict, and
3. What to do if things go wrong and civil war breaks out

I. Prevention is the Best Medicine: How to nurture a culture  
with a robust immunity to personal conflict □

- "Immunity" because the body is always under attack from germs; the goal is not to be germ-free, but for exposure to germs to be a normal part of life that doesn't lead to infection and fever.
- "Culture" because this is work that has to be part of the fabric of daily life, like eating healthfully or going to the gym; it's hard to do effectively once a crisis is already at hand.
- Here is my list of everyday practices:
  1. Develop norms for how people speak to one another. We live in a culture in which personal smears are common when people disagree; it takes care to maintain different norms in the church.
    - i. Someone will always test any norms that have been established, to see if they are real--will they be enforced?
    - ii. Enforcing norms takes a mix of resolve and diplomacy: resolve, because it's easy to let small things slide; and diplomacy, because the norm needs to be enforced with a smile.
  2. Deal with small brush fires quickly; it's much easier and less damaging than once they turn into huge blazes. That can mean running toward flames, which is scary for many of us, but it's better than waiting until the flames are chasing you. Leaders need to go listen to people they learn are upset; and deal promptly with episodes of harmful behavior; and be ready to apologize if it turns out the problem is them.

3. Take the line from James (3:5) seriously: gossip really does start forest fires, and is deeply inconsistent with Christian love. Clergy should preach about it, and both clergy and lay leaders should confront it kindly but firmly when it happens. It takes a lot of time and effort, but it can be uprooted from parish culture.
4. Beware of triangles, when A talks to B (and everyone else!) about C... triangles are the building blocks of factions. Teach one another to recognize them and decline to participate in them.
5. Light and air are strong disinfectants. Churches breed conspiracy theories; if people don't know what's going on, they'll fill in the gaps from their imaginations, and then share the results. Communicate openly, and listen to the responses.
6. Leadership groups such as vestries should know what consensus means (not unanimity, but shared willingness to support the decision), and use it as a standard for decision when possible.
7. A corollary: people need to know they've been heard before they're able to join a consensus that doesn't reflect their own desires; that means discussions can require patience.
8. A further corollary: a split vote is a lousy way to make a decision if there's any alternative, and the more important the decision the worse it is: someone by definition is the loser and may either leave or become a guerrilla.
9. Email is the root of all evil. Ok, not all evil; but a lot of it. People write things to each other that they would never say in person, and once it's written, it gets forwarded everywhere. Establish a practice of using email only for routine organizational things, and if any email conversation gets testy, cut it off with a "let's talk in person" (and then *do* talk in person).
10. There's no substitute for honesty; if leaders want to be trusted, they have to be trustworthy.

## 2. Tough Talk Among Friends: How to Have a Good Argument

Sometimes there are issues about which people or groups differ strongly. For some leaders, this is a scary thing; the fear that disagreements will turn ugly can cause clergy or other leaders to ignore or try to tamp down the argument. That's not usually a successful strategy... pressure will build, and if it has no outlet, the result is unhappy but predictable.

Instead, when there's a dispute building, leaders should engage quickly, and structure the discussion in such a way that it doesn't lead to personal attacks, faction-building, or other forms of personal conflict. Their task, in other words, is to help the community **have an argument without having a war**. Doing that is not just good management; it's a key way the church can offer a witness to the Gospel in a world where even minor disagreements so often lead to literal or figurative violence.

- This is a good time to revisit norms, and insist that “hot” conversations are not the time to dispense with norms, but to honor them most diligently.
- Be clear what the issue is (and make sure that the issue really is the issue). Is the question really the paint color in the the ladies' room? Or is it really about the (male) rector making a decision that he doesn't have to live with, and excluding the input of everyone who will actually be looking at those walls?
  - Personal note: in twelve years as Rector of my former parish, the only time I ever wondered if I wanted to keep my job was after I decided to let the sexton choose the paint color on his own.
  - Further personal note: when someone asks, “why did you paint the walls Pepto-Bismol pink,” there really is no good answer.
- The more important a decision is, the more important it is that everyone affected has a chance to participate.
  - The canons may give the Rector authority over worship, or the Vestry authority over the finances, but that can be slim comfort if the congregation is in an uproar over a decision.
  - Giving people a chance to participate means structuring an opportunity for them to share their ideas *before* the real decision has been made (or else the accusation of a hidden agenda will in fact be true). People are quick to suspect that open discussions are just window dressing for a foregone conclusion; don't let that suspicion be accurate. If the decision really has been made, then hold a meeting to explain it, but don't pretend that the question is still open.
  - Assuming the decision has not been made yet, the process needs to be clear. What is the purpose of the discussion--is it a decisionmaking forum, or advisory? Who will make the final decision? On what basis?
  - The person convening the discussion needs to be flexible about the outcome; if he or she is dedicated to a particular result, then someone else should lead the conversation or the whole thing will seem like an empty show and do more harm than good.
  - Let people say what they need to say, within the norms of Christian discourse, even if it's uncomfortable to hear. Be particularly solicitous of the perspective of those who are not in the majority, and be sure they have a good opportunity to speak of their thoughts and feelings. Otherwise they'll find ways to have that

discussion somewhere else... like the parking lot, the cocktail party, the gathering of those who agree with them; and that's how a faction is born.

- **Don't ever try to resolve an issue conflict by email.** It's like standing on a stack of beach balls: it may be possible in theory, but it will almost always go badly in practice.
- As discussion begins to lead into decision, pay attention to those who are unhappy. What do they need before it's ok for them to not get their way?
  - Do they need to know they were heard? Consider structuring a conversation in which you ask people to make the case for the outcome they do not favor (it can be powerful to hear your own arguments from the mouth of one who disagrees with you—and know that they really get what you're saying).
  - Do they need a “win” on some other issue, so they know their voice matters?
  - Do they need pastoral care, to help them feel they're loved and valued even though people didn't see things their way on a particular matter?
- Know how different people respond to conflict. There's a helpful taxonomy that characterizes people's conflict-responses as follows:
  - *The turtle* (avoids conflict as much as possible; may withdraw entirely)
  - *The shark* (wants to win at all costs; may seem invigorated by the scent of blood)
  - *The fox* (looks for a compromise that solves the immediate problem)
  - *The teddy bear* (wants everyone to be happy; may get angry or despondent when they're not)
  - *The owl* (looks for ways to collaborate that reflect the deep values of the group)

This is pretty rough, but it may help to know that the senior warden, for instance, is a shark; or the Rector a teddy bear. Which are you?
- Recognize that if the issue is about a person (such as a move to oust the Rector), the conflict has is no longer an issue conflict, but has become a personal conflict... and if war hasn't erupted, it will soon.

### 3. What to do if Things go Wrong and Civil War Breaks Out

- *Call for help right away!*
- The Bishop's office is a good first call... as long as it is seen as being:
  - Trustworthy--that is, a source of help rather than a source of danger or difficulty
  - Neutral--that is, without a stake or a side in the current argument
  - Competent--that is, able to actually intervene effectively

If the Bishop's office is *not* viewed as all these things, then it may be more helpful to seek help from a different source; the comments below about the Bishop's office should be read in that light.
- The Bishop's office is experienced at helping congregations live through conflict.

- Sometimes when people are stuck, the extra perspective of someone who isn't caught up in the dispute can help bring resolution.
- Sooner is better than later; the longer a fight goes on, the more bruised people get and the more they have to fight over. At worst, the fight ends up being about the fight itself, and that's a mess.
- Resist the natural feeling that asking for help is a sign of weakness/ failure/ incompetence or whatever else you are afraid of... it's none of those things. The fact is that when a system is in chaos, everyone inside the system is part of the turmoil, and the greatest asset of the outsider is just that—it's someone from outside.
- Have a realistic understanding of what the Bishop's office or other source of intervention can and can not do:
  - It can help with advice, mediation, and reassurance.
  - It can serve as an "honest broker," helping people talk to each other across divides—through formal mediation or less formal discussion facilitation.
  - It can offer care and comfort to embattled clergy and lay leaders.
  - It can remind people about what it means to behave in a Christian manner during conflict.
  - It can not make the conflict go away, silence the "bad guys", or prevent people from being unkind if they're determined to be so.
- Recognize that personal conflict is painful for everyone, especially those in leadership who can't step away when they choose: clergy and wardens as well as others whose roles make them central.
  - Pastoral care is crucial, even if it's the wounded tending to the wounded.
  - Remind one another of what it means to be in Christian community, and that personal attacks are never acceptable.
  - Resist the temptation to divide into factions and demonize one another. Jesus once said that whoever isn't against us is for us; in a destructive fight that can get turned around so that people assume that whomever is not on their side is the enemy. That's a particular problem for those who want not to get swept into the dispute, as well as for outsiders who try to help without taking sides and end up attacked by everyone (this is the mediator's lament!).
- Consider formal mediation, which is a powerful process for helping people to discover common interests and overcome entrenched divisions--but know the limitations of what mediation can accomplish:
  - Mediation is a structured process which invites everyone to articulate what's going on from their perspective; that tries to identify key interests and discern courses of action that can respond to all of them; and that seeks to reach an agreement to take particular actions.

- Mediation can help people to find solutions, but it can not make people *want* to find solutions. If someone is looking to continue the fight rather than resolve it, mediation can not succeed.
- Mediation is about finding a way forward, not adjudicating who was right and who was wrong—which can be a source of frustration to those who want to be proclaimed righteous (or their opponents proclaimed villainous).
- Mediation is the beginning of reconciliation: resolving the dispute to the point where relationships can begin to be rebuilt. It does not by itself constitute the rebuilding, which can take a long time.
- Pray a lot, and remember that God is faithful, though not always as fast as we'd like.

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