

# **Congregational Life Dynamics and Conflict Management: An Application of Family Systems Theory**



## **Part 2: Conflict Management**

**New Congregation and Growth Resources  
Congregational Services  
Unitarian Universalist Association  
of Congregations  
2005**



# Table of Contents

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## **Part 2: Conflict Management**

<b>Conflict Defined: What Is It All About?</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Pushing Back</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Substantive Issues, Relationship Issues</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Unitarian Universalist Values</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Leadership and the Management of Self</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Will and the Perils of Willfulness</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>The Power of a Nonanxious, Present Conflict Manager</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Deep Breathing</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Defining the Self: Immunizing the System</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>Some Modest Do's and Don'ts</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>A Mission Statement</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>A Series of Right Relations Statements</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>Policies for Decision Making</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>Cultivating Attitudes of Respect and Gratitude</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>Resources for Congregational Leadership</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>A Word about Resources</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>Resources on Systems Theory</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>Resources for Conflict Prevention</b> .....	<b>20</b>

**Important note for searching UUA.org:** All UUA resources mentioned are available in the Leaders section of the web site, in the Leaders' Library. Please use quotes around the title when you search to bring up the resource or item you seek.

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## **Part 2: Conflict Management**

Throughout Part 1 we noted that conflict arises out of the fact that we are different people. Along the way we have also noted various situations in which conflict is likely to appear. In Part 2, we'll look at how to use systems theory to manage conflict more successfully.

As noted earlier, the theory provides a way of thinking about life; thus, we will not list here particular methods for managing conflict. See "Resources for Congregational Leadership," on page 17 for more practical how-to counsel. However, if you are a congregation leader confronted with high anxiety and emerging conflict for which your internal systems seem inadequate, you need to call your Unitarian Universalist Association district executive. The district executive is well trained and well connected to additional resources to help you. The elected leadership of the congregation's calling the district executive is a good example of healthy triangulation. Done by anyone else, it is a displacement of anxiety that is best discouraged. Thus, under Unitarian Universalist Association rules, only the congregation's president, board chair, or minister may invite the district executive's intervention. Other congregants who call the district executive will be encouraged to speak first to the congregation's leadership.



### **Conflict Defined: What Is It All About?**

Much can be, has been, and will be written about conflict. Conflict is an inevitable, perhaps necessary part of human living. In its simplest sense, conflict means "to strike together." It is a clash of something: of values, ideas, desires, or needs. It is sometimes a contest of wills, but in all instances conflict connotes a condition of opposition. To the extent it reflects resistance to change within a family or the congregation, conflict is frequently tinged with negative attitude or antagonism. Underneath that resistance is a generalized anxiety or a specific fear.

Conflict includes everything from daily irritations to all-out warfare. The purpose of conflict management is to prevent the anxiety from getting out of hand and leading to behavior that is destructive to individuals or a congregation, or contrary to the highest values of our faith communities.

No healthy person enjoys a fight, but a conflict of values and desires often helps us choose more wisely, and even to care for one another more deeply. Additionally, conflict can be an opportunity to differentiate and know our values and desires more consciously and to develop a greater appreciation for the distinctiveness of persons around us.

Anxiety is a condition of being alive, as we've noted earlier; it is a function of the togetherness force. Tension rises to conflict whenever we feel that our self is at risk. When we are inwardly calm and secure, we manage differences rather routinely and creatively. Indeed, sometimes a little fussing at one another adds spice to a relationship. For example, arguing ideas can make for a most entertaining evening. Sometimes, making our case to one another opens up even better ideas that both parties find appealing. A postsermon conversation, a discussion group, or a well-moderated debate are each forms of conflict that are both fun and useful.

### **PUSHING BACK**

Even though people prefer being surrounded by those who think, act, and value similarly, most individuals would at least give lip service that it is okay to want different things and to hold diverse values. Problems arise when our dissimilarities instill a fear of losing some of our self. If I feel that for you to get what you want, I must lose something that I want, then I will resist you and the change you demand of me. Likewise, if I ask you to accommodate to my want at your expense, quite naturally, you will push back.

To the extent one of us tries to force the other to conform to our demands, antagonism emerges. Soon, I not only just go up against your idea or desire but I take exception to you. This can and often does lead to violence. It is at such times we particularly need to have in place good resources to help us modulate our anxiety and that of others. Differences need not lead to ill will if we have good procedures to sustain us when goodwill fades.

Earlier, we noted that conflict is a function of any disturbance in the emotional field, in the balance of the togetherness force. The following are some of the things we noted that cause such a disturbance:

- Unresolved issues from our family of origin.
- Divergence of role expectations due to sibling position.
- Unexamined values and behavioral expectations.
- Differing perceptions and understandings of one another.
- Getting too close or too far from one another.
- An imbalance between the initial formatting of a system and current

pressures in the environment.

In congregational life, any change that resonates with these personal elements will lead to conflict among members or with leadership. Some of the things that especially disturb congregational tranquility are these:

- The arrival or departure of significant numbers or different kinds of people attending the congregation.
- The departure of a minister with whom members have intense fusion (heroes, as well as villains).
- The arrival of a new minister.
- A change in the physical plant.
- A change in meeting patterns, particularly in the times of worship.
- Significant change in the finances of the congregation, for better or worse.
- Attempts to change the symbolic representations of congregational identity.
- Dramatic shifts in the surrounding community environment.
- Illegal or unethical conduct of any sort.

Anything that changes the balance will elicit resistance (recall reciprocal functioning) and generate conflict. In systems thinking, it is the fear of losing self to the demands of togetherness that accounts for why conflict emerges when and where it does. It explains why people get upset over change—even change they desire. An astute observer will keep this idea in mind while coping with the strain of conflict between people over issues, values, and actions.

### **SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES, RELATIONSHIP ISSUES**

In family and congregational life, the things or issues people fight about can be endless. Just as often, though, issues become issues because of how we feel toward one another. Remember the illustration, "It's not what you said but how you said it." It is important to note here that in any conflict there are two variables to which we need to be sensitive:

1. The nature or content of an issue per se.
2. How we feel toward one another before, during, and after the conflict.

Care needs to be taken to distinguish and separate relationship issues from issues of substance.

The systems questions, always, are, "Why this issue?" and "Why now?" These questions deal with the observable fact that issues are always uniquely located. What upsets one family is of no consequence or only a mild disturbance to another; what bugs me today may not bug me tomorrow. "Why this issue?" and "Why now?" are the questions that anyone managing conflict should keep in mind.

Far too often, though, because of our ingrained preference for a linear model of causality, we focus our attention and energy solely on

- The stated issue at hand: our daughter's new boyfriend, our co-worker's use of the telephone for personal calls, our fellow congregants' not helping clean up after the holiday party, and so on.
- The troublemaker: the one we perceive as the "difficult" person or the "jerk," to whom we attribute all kinds of devious motives.

Given our propensity to think linearly, much conflict management focuses on understanding whether we are dealing with a content or a relationship issue. It is regrettable that too often, our focus leads us to think we can solve the one and not address the other. Consider these examples:

- How often have you heard a church member say something like, "Well, let's take a vote; that will put an end to this"?
- How often have you felt, "Fire the department manager and we'll function just fine, thank you"?
- Have you ever said, "Get rid of a few ne'er-do-wells around here, bring in some new blood, and we'll get along just fine"?
- Have you ever thought, "If only my son and his wife would have a baby, things would be so much better"?

A systems theory perspective indicates that this kind of thinking is naive, even foolhardy; new issues will soon arise to replace today's hot button. There will always be issues. More surprising, though, is that pushing people out may succeed in the short run, but before long the system itself—to regain its balance—will fill the role that person played with yet another "jerk," usually someone who previously had been a fine church member.

This observation leads to a need for caution: Yes, there are methods and techniques to both prevent and minimize destructive conflict. They should be tried as a matter of course. However, to the extent they fail to address the underlying anxiety within the relationship, no real change will occur. Effective conflict management will note that issues are issues to people who are in relationship. Both the content of our disputes and how we feel toward one another must be considered. Otherwise, the chairs may move efficiently around the emotional deck while the ship continues on its unhappy course. It's akin to saying that the problem of children playing with matches can be resolved by not having matches around; sooner or later, the kids will discover butane lighters and burn the house down.

Conflict is always about some disturbance in the emotional field—the homeostatic balance of self and other.

Although systems theory acknowledges that content issues need to be faced, our

interventions will be more successful and enduring if we do not focus overly much on the content and instead help members to differentiate with one another. If an intervention reduces the tensions between us sufficiently to allow a recapture of respect and goodwill so that we no longer fear the loss of self, then it will open the way to clear thinking, which in turn will lead to a better working through of issues.



## **Unitarian Universalist Values**

Is there anything about our faith that shapes our approach to conflict management? One would hope so. Indeed, many conflicts within congregations escalate in part because our espoused theological values and those we practice in a fight seem to have no bearing on one another. Too often, in our anxiety, we succumb to a “My way or the high way!” and an “I am or you (preferably) are outta here!” way of confronting problems.

So, before a conflict, as well as in the midst of one, let us pause just a moment to ask, Does our faith require us to behave in any particular way? Said more succinctly, WWUUD? — What would a Unitarian Universalist do?

The following premises are distinctive to our faith, and they matter. We Unitarian Universalists seek

- Not just to affirm and promote in the abstract, but to respect one another’s dignity actively, in all our encounters.
  - Thus, to engage each other caringly and carefully, and not to behave in ways that are intentionally hurtful.
  - To rely on persuasion rather than coercion.
- To accept one another as growing persons, neither perfect nor “jerks.”
  - Thus, to avoid blaming one another for problems.
  - To take care not to engage in mind reading or in attributing unsavory motives to others.
- To believe that each of us has some part of the truth and rarely, if ever, does any one of us have the whole or sole truth.
  - Thus, to speak our truth.
  - To listen to the truth of our companions.
  - To welcome, not fear, our diversity.
- To believe that a congregation exists to serve a greater good.
  - Thus, not to insist only on our own way (my self trumps all others).
  - To appreciate that there are many pathways and manners of ethical human expression.

- To be responsible agents—that whatever the divine may be, we are its hands.
  - Thus, not to expect someone to bail us out.
  - To accept full responsibility for the good or ill of our work together.
  - To take the initiative when it comes to solving our problems.

Systems theory and our Unitarian Universalist values go hand in hand, each informing the other and providing both method and spiritual foundation to the work of conflict management.



### **Leadership and the Management of Self**

How successful have you ever been in trying to change someone? Not just to get their cooperation or accommodation to your ambition but to really change that person? The odds are not good. For that matter, how successful have you been in trying to change yourself?

Change is a given of existence. Both the physical world and the nonmaterial world of our thinking and feeling are exceptionally dynamic. This is the basis of hope. Yet, how change occurs often baffles us, or our attempts to bring about change backfire.

Systems theory can reduce some of the puzzle. First, we note again that systems follow Newton’s law: Things are inclined to stay the way they are. The law also states that things can change when an external force is applied. In human relations, that external force is human desire or will. You and I can be that external force on a relationship system (even if it is only our desire to lose weight or go into a new career).

#### **WILL AND THE PERILS OF WILLFULNESS**

Yet, even when you are, or I am, that external force on a relationship we confront real limits. Beyond the staying power of all systems, there are some things that can, and others that cannot, be willed:

- You can will yourself to sit down to dinner; you cannot will an appetite.
- You can will people coming together; you cannot will their affection.
- You can will unhappy people to talk to each other; you cannot will them to like each other.
- You can will going to bed; you cannot will going to sleep.
- You can will a policy for congregational governance; you cannot will people to follow the rules.

These observations suggest we should feel a profound humility when it comes to expecting that we can change others. We can will people to hear our complaint or



desire; we cannot will them to comply. For that matter, this may be the core issue of conflict management: working to create a desired change without trying to force it on others. Somehow, we need to come to a shared desire, mutually respectful of our divergent needs and wants, if we are to change the balance of forces in the relational system.

Conflict management, then, may have something to do with managing one's self rather than others. Systems theory argues that if I change me within our relationship, it will change you. So here's the ultimate paradox: When I am feeling conflicted with you, I don't need to do anything to you. I need only to work on me and my own functioning. How I manage me is the primary variable (and the only one I can will!). Using the language described earlier, if I work at differentiating myself from our emotional field (and thereby act less reactively to you and the pull of togetherness), that alone will change the nature of the field. That, in turn, will provoke and enable you to define yourself more ably to me, or to more readily differentiate yourself from me.

However, as has been repeatedly noted, the initial response to any change plan is resistance. The first, automatic response to any new demand is always "no." When confronted with resistance, the togetherness force is pulling the self back in line. However, as we are not automatons and we can will ourselves to function differently, we can resist our own resistance. That is, if we offer a new idea and do not get anxious, defensive, or willful when challenged, the possibility emerges that the new idea can be heard.

As a congregational leader now aware that complaints are a sign of a perceived threat to the stability of relationships, all you need to do is to stay present and work on your self. The practical part of that work is to repeatedly say things such as "Here I stand," "This is what I value or what I believe," "My preferences include . . .," or "I respect your point of view; here is how I see it."

This is hard to do when someone is coming on strong, filled with anxiety and demanding that you change where you stand. The automatic response to the togetherness force is to back down and go compliant. However, if our own self is threatened sufficiently, we may just as easily escalate the conflict by pushing back and trying to will the other to change all the more. A rule of systems thinking is that willfulness always begets willfulness.

### **THE POWER OF A NONANXIOUS, PRESENT CONFLICT MANAGER**

Anxiety is a phenomenon of the togetherness force. Thus, when we face conflict, one of the things that needs our attention is how anxious we feel and about what. Anxiety leads to nonthinking behavior. The more anxious we become, the less able we are to discuss issues reasonably. Consequently, we rely more on willfulness. So asking, "What is it about this that upsets me?" is a good step in conflict management.

The ramping of anxiety is biologically based in the part of the brain known as the

amygdala. This organ deep within the brain controls the automatic freeze/flight/fight behavior. It is part of what is sometimes called the power brain (also known as the reticular activating system or, more pejoratively, the reptile brain). It is easy to identify behavior associated with this brain function:

- Freeze: Do you remember a time you were in an argument and your mind went blank? Some days later, you complained to a friend, "What I should have said to him then was . . . ."
- Flight: Recall a time when a parent or boss angrily chewed you out. Did you not want to run and hide, perhaps in the cracks between the floor tiles?
- Fight: Have you never felt the impulse to clobber another?

In groups, anxiety is an infectious disease. Conflict management spends a great deal of time working to prevent an amygdala hijack, where all thinking goes by the wayside and mindless acting out takes over.

Returning now to resistance to change, as a congregational leader managing conflict, one of your first jobs is to keep yourself as calm as you can be. To borrow from Rudyard Kipling, "If you can keep your head clear when all those around you are losing theirs, then you can actually help." Think of the captain of a ship amidst a stormy sea, a general on the battlefield, or an emergency room physician; staying calm is one of any leader's major responsibilities. This is one reason we need to triangle in a third party (to reduce the effect of our entrapment to the freeze/flight/fight hijack).

In systems theory, working to be calm within an anxiety field is called being a nonanxious presence. This does not mean the conflict manager is free of anxiety. It means the person is paying extra attention to how his or her anxiety is getting in the way of being present to others and choosing (to the extent possible) not to let the anxiety take over his or her own functioning. Being a nonanxious presence means being present and connected. It requires work on being better differentiated, or clearly defining one's self in the context of the emotional field.

There are two primary ways to work on being a nonanxious, present conflict manager: (1) breathing slowly and deeply and (2) taking I stands in which you define your self to others and in so doing differentiate yourself.

### **DEEP BREATHING**

The ancient gurus knew something that recent brain research has now explained. The autonomic nervous system is immediately connected to our breathing. It is also secondarily linked to our neocortex, and therefore partially under our control. The old yogis advocated slow, deep breathing as part of a meditative practice. It turns out that this restrains the functioning of the amygdala. By choosing to regulate and lower your respiration, you will override the freeze/flight/fight reaction. It is literally so: You cannot remain anxious if you breathe deeply and slowly. To validate this idea, notice how fast and shallow you breathe when scared.

When the freeze/flight/fight trigger is pulled, the amygdala pours cortisol into the bloodstream. This action elevates all your motor activity at the expense of cortical functioning. You act without thinking. This is tremendously helpful in a life-threatening emergency. Most church and family matters, happily, are not of that sort. Not thinking is simply not productive for managing conflict, so anything you can do to help you and others remain nonreactive is a first step toward managing conflict. One way to do that is to breathe, deep and slow. It may take some moments of intentional effort, because your bloodstream is already filled with adrenaline. Yet working to consciously slow down your breathing will allow your brain's thinker to function again. This is essentially what a "time-out" does for upset kids or a "let me sleep on it" does for adults.

Intuitively, every parent understands this concept when kissing a child's boo-boo and saying, "There, there, it will be all right." Holding the child close allows her to cry herself out and slows down her breathing. Before you know it, the child is up and playing happily again. It is no different for adults. Inviting someone to slow down and breathe deeply is the first thing to do in any conflict.

Additionally, a considerable body of research says you can calm another person simply by being quietly present to them. As Proverb 15:1 says, "A soft answer turneth away wrath." When you are a nonanxious presence, others will adapt to your emotional field. Of course, anxiety is contagious. Some anxious people will think you don't care if you don't share their anxiety. A good conflict manager will affirm an appreciation for the other's fears yet not take them on.

In a moment, we'll turn to practical preconflict techniques to help congregational leaders keep systems calm and calm them down again when they get anxious. First, though, we will discuss the second way for a conflict manager to maintain a nonanxious presence: self-management as a function of the differentiation of self.

### **DEFINING THE SELF: IMMUNIZING THE SYSTEM**

Every day we are surrounded by pathogenic or toxic forces. Even healthy bodies are exposed to viruses or are filled with germs; most everyone has cancer cells floating around inside. Yet we do not get sick. When we do get sick, then, why do we? As in our discussion of "Issues of Substance, Issues of Relationship" on page 5, we again ask: Why this issue? Why now?

Recall our earlier discussion, in Part 1, of cellular boundaries and the ability to distinguish self from not-self. Physically, we do not get sick when our internal immune system is in good balance and knows how to prevent invasion by not-self forces. Psychologically, spiritually, we don't get our feelings hurt or experience differences as a threat if we are clear about who we are emotionally and cognitively, and clear about our values. This is the very meaning of being a differentiated person: knowing where we begin and end—what is us and what is not us.

However, as we are all fused to some degree and are always borrowing or giving away self, the boundaries of self get fuzzy. It follows that anything we can do that clarifies and strengthens our boundaries, while we stay connected (not cutting off), will have a reciprocal effect on others. This idea is profound and is crucial to our understanding of conflict management: To the extent I regulate my self (mostly by modulating my anxiety), I will affect others. It will help them to know and maintain their boundaries. The result will be a diminishing of reactive anxiety overall, less control by the amygdala, and a better functioning by all our thinking caps.

An important part of conflict management is to work on creating healthy boundaries of self within the relationship system. The way we do that is to take stands, which declare where we begin and end. It is declaring, as clearly as we can, what we think, value, and feel. It always begins with I: "I want . . .," "I will (or will not) . . .," "I think . . .," or "I value . . . ." It is the capacity to draw your boundaries clearly that most helps others to do the same. In systems theory, defining self to others in this way is the equivalent of the body's immune system.

How essential this is to the health of self and healthy systems can be represented by a simple ratio. As the immune system is strengthened, pathogens have less impact on our functioning. Conversely, a weak immune system means that a body can be done in by the smallest of invasive forces. Arithmetically, the idea is expressed in this way:

$$HE = TP/RO$$

HE represents the total hostility of an environment. TP is the toxicity of pathogenic forces. These can be true poisons or family or society members who are negatively acting out. RO stands for the response of the organism.

When this formula is applied to congregational life, it says the danger of any conflict is a function both of negative forces at play and of the strength of conflict managers. That is to say, as the toxicity of pathogenic forces increases, its ability to hurt a congregation depends on how weak or strong the leadership's immune system is. As the response of the organism diminishes, the hostility of an environment increases. As the response of the organism increases, conflict is less likely to be harmful to the congregation.

There will always be plenty of invasive agents in any social system. Therefore, rather than trying to guard against them all, the theory says that conflict managers should work on increasing the level of their own functioning. Those congregations that work well at creating good, clear boundaries of how members ideally will interact with one another, those that have good decision procedures, and those whose leadership is functioning well are just less likely to have conflicts escalate out of hand. Similarly,

congregations that have weak boundaries, where leadership is unclear or uncertain, are more likely to have minor mishaps lead to major blowouts.

In this way, leadership development and conflict management are all part of the same activity.



### **Some Modest Do's and Don'ts**

We have quite intentionally not offered a laundry list of steps to take in order to manage conflict. Many resources already do that. Rather, our ambition is to help congregational leaders think differently about what is genuinely going on in the midst of a conflict so that our values remain intact, so that people's dignity is not compromised, and so that the congregation can go about its productive work to make the world a better place.

There is no guarantee that any policy or procedure will prevent conflict or manage all conflict readily. However, one can say that to the extent a congregation does not have these policies or procedures in place, it is more likely to suffer debilitating conflict.

At this point, we begin to see conflict management as part of the cycle that leads to healthy congregations. We conclude this section, then, by noting that our values and the insights of systems theory suggest that a self-defining, better-differentiated congregation will have in place a mission statement, a series of right relations statements, policies for decision making, and attitudes of respect and gratitude.

### **A MISSION STATEMENT**

Congregations with a clear mission know better what they are about—what is in their emotional field and what is not.

- A mission establishes the boundaries of the emotional field.
- The mission statement becomes the congregation's core definition of self.
- A dream or vision derived from the congregation members' shared vision or a long-range plan, or both, will further delineate what is and is not self to the congregation.
  - This plan, in turn, makes it easier to know what to say yes or no to.
  - Creating such a plan will give members an opportunity to practice differentiation as they wrestle with what they are about.

## **A SERIES OF RIGHT RELATIONS STATEMENTS**

The immune system of a congregation is stronger to the extent that there are clear and widely publicized understandings of how members will relate to one another and to individuals who work on the congregation's behalf. These understandings include the following:

- So-called covenants of right relations.
  - Member to member.
  - Members to program staff.
  - Members to support staff.
  - Program staff to members.
  - Program staff to one another.
  - Program staff to support staff.
  - Adults to children.
- Procedures for managing conflict.
  - Identification of who one goes to in the event of trouble.
  - Policies for dealing with disruptive persons.
  - A trusted and well-known committee on ministry.
- Safe practices for children and adults with regard to the following:
  - Human sexuality—adults/adults and adults/children.
  - Travel away from the congregation.
  - Alcohol, drugs, and firearms.

## **POLICIES FOR DECISION MAKING**

Many congregational conflicts are not about issues but about how issues are dealt with. Again, it is an act of self-definition to have clear, freely negotiated and publicized agreements for how we will do business. This includes the following:

- An up-to-date, frequently reviewed set of bylaws.
- Procedures for initiating change.
- Clarity about who makes what kind of decision, and when.
  - The powers reserved to the congregation's membership.
  - The powers entrusted to the board of trustees.
  - The powers delegated to church staff, both paid and volunteer.
  - The powers of individuals.
- Procedures for dealing with grievances.
  - Member to member and member to staff.
  - For groups within the congregation.
- Clear and accessible ways for members to define themselves to one another and to congregational leadership.
- Clear and empowered leadership.
- Clear and predetermined procedures for addressing conflict as it arises, with the goal of lowering the anxiety at every step.
- Clear and frequent affirmation of the value of each person in the relationship.
- Clear and frequent affirmation of the good of the order.

## **CULTIVATING ATTITUDES OF RESPECT AND GRATITUDE**

We join a congregation to have a healthy engagement of self and togetherness. Healthy congregations actively promote the health of relationships by doing the following:

- Overtly teaching Unitarian Universalist values.
- Ensuring that members know about the policies for decision making.
- Affirming and celebrating healthy encounters.
  - Teaching right relations at all levels.
  - Not tolerating or enabling hurtful practices.
  - Guarding against factionalization.
  - Naming triangles wherever they appear.
  - Fixing problems, not assigning blame.
  - Avoiding mind reading and the attributing of motives.
  - Going beyond “do unto others” by doing even better.
- Cultivating the practice of deep listening.
  - Encouraging the asking of questions before offering judgments.
  - Inviting members frequently to define themselves to one another with the following:
    - Credo classes.
    - Personal testimonials.
    - Teaching the use of I language.
- Frequently holding up, recognizing, and celebrating what is going well and right in the congregation’s life.

For processes on developing statements and making real their meaning in congregational life, please refer to Vision, Mission, and Covenant: Creating a Future Together, at [UUA.org](http://UUA.org) by going to the Leaders’ Library and searching “Vision, Mission, Covenant.”\*



## References

The French bacteria experiment discussed in Part 1, pages 13-15, is cited by Edwin H. Friedman in *The Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (Bethesda, MD: Edwin Friedman Estate, 1999), p. 232ff.

The image of the pushmi-pullyu in Part 1, page 17 can be found at A Networked World, at [http://keynet.blogs.com/networks/2003/09/send\\_for\\_dr\\_doo.html](http://keynet.blogs.com/networks/2003/09/send_for_dr_doo.html).

The quotation from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in Part 1, on page 20 is from *Wisdom of the Sands* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanowich, 1950, 1978), and cited in the Unitarian Universalist Association's hymnal *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993), reading 649.





## Resources for Congregational Leadership

### A Word about Resources

The literature regarding conflict management is vast. Here are just a few resources, along with a reminder to contact your district executive for more direction. The Unitarian Universalist Association Web site includes a variety of tools to help you both prevent and manage conflict.

### Resources on Systems Theory

For specific details on Murray Bowen's family systems theory, see the Bowen Family Center Web site, at [www.thebowencenter.org/](http://www.thebowencenter.org/). The eight components of the theory are presented with a case study application at [www.thebowencenter.org/pages/theory.html](http://www.thebowencenter.org/pages/theory.html).

Bowen, Murray. *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*. New York: Jason Aronson, 1985.

This is a collection of Bowen's writings and lectures from 1957 through 1977.

Friedman, Edwin H. *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*. New York: Guilford Press, 1985.

This is the primary application of systems theory to congregational life. Until his death, Rabbi Friedman coached countless clergy and lay leaders in applying the theory. This book describes family systems theory in detail to reveal how congregational families function.

Galindo, Israel. *The Hidden Lives of Congregations: Discerning Church Dynamics*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2004.

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Gilbert describes what a healthy, well-differentiated functioning family is like.

Kerr, Michael E., and Murray Bowen. *Family Evaluation*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1988.

This book offers the basic presentation of the theory.

Papero, Daniel V. *Bowen Family Systems Theory*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1990, 1997.

Richardson, Ronald W. *Creating A Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership and Congregational Life*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996.

Richardson provides practical leadership ideas and guidelines for how to behave in the midst of upsetting and conflictual circumstances.

Steinke, Peter L. *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1996.

Steinke argues that the most effective way to nurture congregational health is by shifting the focus from single individuals or issues to the way the congregation functions as a whole.

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

Applying family systems thinking, Steinke notes how the self/force dynamic engenders anxiety and struggle in congregational life and shows how to offer healthy responses.

### **Additional Texts Explicating Systems Theory**

The Alban Institute is the preeminent organization studying and supporting healthy congregational life. Its Web site is at [www.alban.org](http://www.alban.org). Its congregational resources site, at [www.congregationalresources.org](http://www.congregationalresources.org), provides a rich compendium of tools. The subsite Congregational Vitality/Systems, at [www.congregationalresources.org/ShowCat.asp?CN=84](http://www.congregationalresources.org/ShowCat.asp?CN=84), is specifically useful when thinking of the church as an emotional system. At this site you will find videos that also teach systems thinking. A useful one is Peter Steinke, *The Balancing Act: The Congregation as a Healthy Emotional System*. In this video produced by Seraphim Communications, Steinke draws on systems theory to explain how congregations function, how conflict emerges, and how leaders can promote healthy emotional systems in congregations.

Friedman, Edwin H. "Bowen Theory and Therapy," in *Handbook of Family Therapy*, ed. A. S. Gurman and D. P. Kniskern. New York: Brunner-Mazel, 1991.

Friedman, Edwin H. *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*. Edwin Friedman Estate, 1999.

Order this work from the Edwin Friedman Trust, 6 Wynkoop Ct., Bethesda, MD 20817 (telephone 301-229-4319).

Friedman, Edwin H. *Family Process and Process Theology: Basic New Concepts*, distributed by The Alban Institute, Bethesda, MD.

Rabbi and family therapist Edwin Friedman compares process theology with the concepts of family process.

Friedman, Edwin H. *Reinventing Leadership*, distributed by Guilford Publications, New York.

This video describes how communities become dysfunctional when they are gripped by anxiety and how such communities tend to sabotage healthy leadership. The study guide is an excellent presentation of the theory.

Oshry, Barry. *Leading Systems: Lessons from the Power Lab*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999.

Oshry brings a new twist to the understanding of how systems work within organizations. His focus is on how power and position play out in every organization, with conflict a given between the "tops," the "middles," and the "bottoms."

Parsons, George, and Speed B. Leas. *Understanding Your Congregation as a System: The Manual*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1993.

This is a practical tool for applying systems theory to congregational life in six key areas.

Rendle, Gilbert R. *Leading a Congregation through Change*, at [www.alban.org](http://www.alban.org).

In this essay, Rendle discusses the resistance to change and how leaders need to help congregants "become uncomfortable with their discomfort" and focus on the possibilities that change presents rather than the pain that accompanies it.

Richardson, Ronald W. *Becoming A Healthier Pastor: Family Systems Theory and the Pastor's Own Family*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2005.

Richardson, Ronald W. *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996.

Richardson, Ronald W. *Family Ties That Bind: A Self-Help Guide to Change through Family of Origin Therapy*. North Vancouver, BC: International Self-Counsel Press, 1984.

Richardson, Ronald W., and Lois A. Richardson. *Birth Order and You: How Your Sex and Position in the Family Affects Your Personality and Relationships*. North Vancouver, BC: International Self-Counsel Press, 1990.

Sagar, Ruth Riley, and Kathleen Klaus Wiseman, eds. *Understanding Organizations: Applications of Family Systems Theory*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Family Center, 1982.

This work contains eleven different papers presented at a symposium on applying Bowen Family Systems Theory to organizations.

Sweeney, Linda Booth. *The Systems Thinking Playbook: Exercises to Stretch and Build Learning and Systems Thinking Capabilities*. Durham, NH: Institute for Policy and Social Science Research, 1995.

This is a hands-on guide for applying systems theory.

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### **Resources for Conflict Prevention**

Healthy functioning in congregational life corresponds directly to anything we do that clarifies our values and expectations to one another, that encourages clear understandings, and that empowers leaders and members to take stands based on our Unitarian Universalist values.

### **Resources for Understanding Congregational Conflict**

Cosgrove, Charles H., and Dennis D. Hatfield. *Church Conflict: The Hidden Systems behind the Fights*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994.

Nontheist readers will need to do some translation.

Leas, Speed B. *Moving Your Church through Conflict*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1996.

Leas is Alban's leading expert on congregational conflict. In this volume, he shows how congregational leaders can identify and respond to various levels of congregational conflict and recognize when it's time to seek outside help.

Lott, David B., ed. *Conflict Management in Congregations*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001.

This volume collects the wisdom of Alban consultants such as Speed Leas, George Parsons, Margaret Bruehl, Gil Rendle, Alice Mann, and Roy Pneumann in three areas: the dynamics of conflict, conflict management techniques, and conflict in specific contexts.

## **Practical Tools for Preventing and Managing Conflict**

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

It is a sign of our own anxiety when we begin blaming and name-calling behavior. Boers focuses on the behavior of a group as a whole, not just on the behavior of "difficult people."

Day, Katie. *Difficult Conversations: Taking Risks, Acting with Integrity*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001.

Fisher, Roger, William L. Ury, and Bruce Patton. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.

This popular book addresses a practical strategy for people to deal with their differences—a process of "principled negotiation," or looking for mutual gains whenever possible.

Stone, Douglas, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen. *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

Ursiny, Timothy E. *The Coward's Guide to Conflict: An Expert's Guide to Facing Conflict Head-on and Building Confidence along the Way*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2003.

Ursiny hates conflict as much as anyone, yet he offers here a step-by-step approach to prepare for conflict, maintain your integrity, and learn to handle conflict more effectively.

Ury, William L. *Getting Past No: Negotiating Your Way from Confrontation to Cooperation*. New York: Bantam Doubleday, 1993.

This guide suggests we can face the tensions in relationships by working from a posture of cooperation rather than confrontation. This approach, which is "interest based" rather than being "rights based" or "power based," is particularly helpful with the problem of willfulness when anxiety goes high.

Ury, William L. *The Third Side: Why We Fight and How We Can Stop*. New York: Penguin, 2000.

This book takes the triangle as its basic motif. Ury argues that it takes two sides to fight, but a third to stop. He offers practical steps to prevent destructive conflict. Consider also the Web site at [www.thirdside.org](http://www.thirdside.org).

## Resources for Cultivating Right Relations

Haffner, Debra W. *Balancing Acts: Keeping Children Safe in Congregations*. Available online at [UUA.org](http://UUA.org) >Leaders' Library> search "Balancing Acts"\*

This is a practical tool for establishing good practices and confronting unethical conduct when it occurs.

Hoertdoerfer, Patricia, and William Sinkford, eds. *Creating Safe Congregations: Toward an Ethic of Right Relations*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005.

Available from the Unitarian Universalist Association Bookstore ([UUA.org/bookstore](http://UUA.org/bookstore)), this volume provides innovative and versatile resources for examining and addressing the problem of sexual abuse in the church setting. It offers practical strategies for examining clergy misconduct, peer harassment, and child abuse.

Rendle, Gilbert R. *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999.

Rendle, a senior consultant with The Alban Institute, offers an approach to managing differences with maturity and respect.

*Vision, Mission, and Covenant: Creating a Future Together*, available at [UUA.org](http://UUA.org) >Leaders' Library> search "Vision, Mission, Covenant."\*

Additionally, at the *Safe Congregations* page ([UUA.org](http://UUA.org) >Leaders' Library>search "Safe Congregations"\*), you will find policies of good practice for dealing with disruptive persons, including convicted sex offenders.



## Additional Tools from the Unitarian Universalist Association

The Unitarian Universalist Association's publication for lay leaders, *Interconnections*, has many good offerings for congregational leadership. See [UUA.org](http://UUA.org) >Leaders' Library> search "Lay Leaders."\* There, especially, you will find Frequently Asked Questions About Conflict Management, with references to additional tools.

The Unitarian Universalist Association's Department of Ministry and Professional Leadership's publication *Assessing Our Leadership* is available online at [UUA.org](http://UUA.org)>Leaders' Library> search "Assessing Our Leadership."\* This booklet helps leadership to keep in touch with the ministry of the congregation by assessing all activities that advance the congregation's mission. It turns evaluation of ministry away from "giving a score" to "assessing how are we doing, what should we do next." This avoids the blame game and recognizes that healthy systems need always to be reviewing their work and updating their plans.

A companion tool, called *Congregational Self-Assessment*, is also available from the Unitarian Universalist Association, at [UUA.org](http://UUA.org) >Leaders' Library, search "Self-Assessment."\* The process described is ideal for working with long-range planning and comparing a congregation with others of similar context.

Heller, Anne Odin. *Churchworks: A Well-Body Book for Congregations*. Boston: Skinner House, 1999.

Written by a Unitarian Universalist Association consultant, this work abounds with good practices for ensuring healthy systems in your congregation. It is available from the Unitarian Universalist Association Bookstore, at [UUA.org/bookstore](http://UUA.org/bookstore).

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Special thanks to the Reverend Kenneth Gordon Hurto, senior minister, Unitarian Universalist Church of Fort Myers, Florida, for primary authorship of these two chapters.



**\*Important note for searching UUA.org:** All UUA resources mentioned are available in the Leaders section of the web site, in the Leaders' Library. Please use quotes around the title when you search to bring up the resource or item you seek.