

Frequent Church Stressors and Issues

- Loss of a longtime clergy member
- Mismanagement of financial resources
- Clergy or other church leaders sexually acting out
- New building program (actual or proposed)
- Forces resignation of clergy or staff
- Steady or sudden loss of membership
- Important changes in the lives of congregation's leaders (divorce, job change, health issues etc.)
- Intense staff conflict
- Major facilities loss or destruction
- Chronic, nagging complaints
- Sudden death of a child or children
- Economic depression in the larger community
- Rifts between clergy and congregation
- Perennial shortages of money
- Conflicting goals (growth, changes, liturgy, programs etc)

Sources of Church Conflict

1. People disagree about values and beliefs
2. The congregation's organizational leadership structure is unclear (roles, decision making etc.)
3. The pastor's role and responsibilities are unclear and a source of disagreement in the congregation
4. The congregation's organizational structure no longer fits its size
5. The clergy and organizational leadership styles and goals don't match
6. The clergy makes hurried changes without the congregation's support
7. Communication lines are inadequate and mechanisms for voices concerns and ideas are unclear
8. The Congregation has a culture of dealing with conflict in unproductive ways
9. Disaffected church members want control over the congregation's power and resources

Communicating During Conflict

1. **Create the Space:** Find a time and place when you and the other parties are ready and in a state of mind to discuss the issues. Be realistic about how much time is needed. Think about whether a third party is needed (see levels of conflict). Be sure you have all the information you need. The space needs to be comfortable and neutral
2. **Be Open:** Seek first to understand. Be open to other views or ways of seeking the situation. Be non-reactive if possible. Try to find common interest to start negotiating.
3. **Be an Active Listener:** Try paraphrasing or summarizing what you have heard the other person say. Use a talking stick. Be clear and precise what you respond.
4. **Be specific:** Do not try to say too much or use inflammatory language. Think about what you want. Use I statements.. (I feel, I am concerned about, this is how I can impact by--- etc.)
5. **Separate inventing from deciding:** Generate multiple options before voting on what actions may be taken. Discuss how decisions are going to be made and by whom. Use techniques like the ask Why 5 time to get at root causes.
6. **Speak for yourself:** Let others have their say. Respect the rights of those not present.
7. **Use a Parking Lot Process:** Set aside issues not appropriate to the meeting or for which you do not have enough information or the right people to deal with. Record items on another sheet of paper and keep going.
8. **Focus on Interests not Positions:** Try to elicit the real concerns not the solutions or answers. Use language like “help me understand the reasoning on that” “Or how does this issue impact you”?
9. **Clarify your intentions:** Ask “what are your needs and intentions?” Or “what is your purpose? Or “What would you like out of this process?” Frame the discussion and the assumptions you have made coming into the session. Check for understanding of your assumptions.
10. **Generate proposals:** Such as “What I suggest is”? “We could do” ..? “My preference is to” ...
11. **Agree on what you can:** Focus on areas of common agreement or even agreement on the process being used. Say “I can agree with you on that”...” Or “it seems as if we both agree on”....?

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SKILLS

WHAT WORKS

Validating, validating, validating

Reframing

Clarifying

Use of nouns, not adjectives

Encouraging parties to talk

Listening non-judgmentally

Not assuming

Setting the tone

Building trust

Restating what you've heard

Generating optimism with parties' ability to resolve dispute

Modeling communication skills

Identifying/clarifying interests, needs

Assisting in negotiation

Neutrality

Face-saving techniques

Validating, validating, validating

WHAT DOES NOT WORK

Advocating for either party

Giving advice

Legal advising

Acting as an attorney

Getting emotionally involved

Arguing with disputants

Disagreeing with disputants

Taking sides

Blaming

Functioning as a therapist

Dictating solutions/settlements

Preaching

Judging/moralizing language

Insulting/degrading language

Shaking head to agree/disagree

Doodling on your paper

Acting out, internal bias, imposing our values, opposing their values (invalidating their values)

CONFLICT DYNAMICS, ENCAPSULATED

Conflict takes different shape according to its level of intensity, and can escalate from creative everyday living into living hell, through a sequence of five stages:

- 1 ► Every conflict is born as a **problem to solve**. Life offers us problems to solve every day. We don't call them conflicts because they don't scare us; they kindle creativity. Neo-cortex abuzz and in full charge, we revel in reasoning them through.
- 2 ► But anxiety begins to rise when we worry if we'll come out okay or wonder if maybe someone's at fault here. The older mammalian brain awakens to potential danger, and the matter escalates into **disagreement**. Concern builds, and we seek safety, generalize the problem, and cease to share all we know.
- 3 ► As open communication breaks down, the problem escalates further into a **contest**. We line up sides, and strive to win. This is familiar ground. Games are contests, often zestful and exciting. But once problems become contests, we succumb to either/or thinking, and our opponent becomes someone to beat.
- 4 ► Turn up the fire a bit, and "beat" mutates into "beat *up*." The reptilian brain kicks in, and players are in a battle for survival. It's **fight or flight** now. Ideas mire into ideologies. We aim to prevail and to punish.
- 5 ► The battle can escalate still further, until players perceive their opponents as evil, and dare not stop fighting. Now we're at **war**, and saving the world justifies any means.

NOTE ABOVE - that communication between people grows increasingly indirect, filtered and distant. This shutting down of communication is the critical factor in the escalation of conflict. Without reversing this there is little hope of resolution.

Relating *Unitarian Universalist principles* to these levels —

It's clear that our first principle, *the inherent worth and dignity of every person*, is the operating premise at level 1.

Some doubt may arise at level 2, but our third principle serves well: *acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth*, in this case a spirit of mutuality and goodwill.

By level 3, *the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process* (our 5th principle) is in play, with winners being determined by majority vote. By level 4, however, survival instincts are kicking in, and our principles do not prevail.

Conflict Management Phases

A guide to tools and methods for each phase

By Dan Wiseman

1. Prevention

- Love is the ultimate prevention tool-easy to save, hard to do!
- Self Care-learning about yourself, becoming a vibrant person, managing stress
- Root cause solutions to human dilemmas (Social, Economic, Justice Systems, Health Care, Education etc)
- Bridge Building across cultures, preferences and races
- Mindfulness
- Using humor but not sarcasm

2. Clarification of Issues-what are we fighting about

- Listening actively
- Creating timely feedback systems
- Articulating your needs, intentions and concerns
- Gathering data jointly
- Deciding if it is worth fighting about?
- Exploring to see if any easy solutions exist?

3. Assessing Readiness for Change

- What is our BATNA (best alternative to not negotiating with each other)
- What are the stakes for each of us
- Can we change-skills, rewards, control of our lives, system
- What's in it for me?
- Availability of third party facilitators and resources
- Creating physical space and time

4. Exploring Options for Win-Win Solutions

- Creativity Tools (Debono, Roger Van Ouch etc.)
- Group Dynamic
- Criteria Screening
- Defining success and decision making
- Interest based negotiation
- Designing experiments
- Looking for quick wins to create momentum

5. Implementation and Evaluation

- Action Planning and Clear Next Steps
- Communication to stakeholders
- Short term wins
- Evaluation Criteria
- Recognizing success and making corrections
- Observing how it is working