



## Dealing with Conflict

Conflict is natural, simply a part of the territory of life. We can seek to avoid it. However, we will rarely eliminate it. When involved in a conflicted situation, it is likely to feel a very hard place to be. We can recognise how ill equipped we are to address the conflict. Our challenge is to make peace with its presence.



As conflict in its extreme form is witnessed across many parts of our world, so, too, do we encounter conflict in our personal lives, our families, our work place and our communities. Conflict here can be seen as a disagreement between interdependent people, the perception of incompatible or mutually exclusive needs or goals. It is said that conflict equals difference plus tension. The degree to which that tension escalates defines the level of conflict and the possible intervention needed. Where tension is low, the disagreement should be capable of being resolved between the parties. If the tension escalates it may be appropriate to bring in a third side, a mediator, to help to resolve the dispute. At higher levels where the conflict is characterised by flight or fight, leadership authority or outside adjudication will be necessary to deescalate the conflict.

Our churches are not immune from conflict. Whilst it is understood that the Christian way is one of seeking peace and loving our neighbour, any consideration of the early Christian church tells a different story. Today our churches across all denominations are encountering a degree of conflict. This is evidenced in the breakdown in relationships within churches, causing factional splits, often polarised around the minister.

So, if there is a need to accept the reality of conflict as a part of our church life, we need to be better equipped. Rather than denying its existence, our challenge is how to address conflict and to see the potential to positively transform our relationships, our churches and communities. We cannot always choose the conflicts that come into our lives, but we can choose how to respond.

To equip ourselves:

- Be aware of differing perspectives

All too easily we fall into the trap of thinking I am right and you are wrong. Our language resonates blame. The reality is that we will only see things from our perspective, the other will have their perspective and in a large group there will be multiple perspectives. Be curious to discover the other's perspective.

- Be aware of our own 'baggage'

We may be carrying fears, hurts and humiliations from past experiences into the present and influencing present circumstances. We need to heighten our self-awareness and recognise that others will be carrying their own 'baggage'.



- Be aware of the need to listen more than to speak  
We need to practice the art of active listening, suspending our own assumptions and desire to get our point across. By listening, we will seek to understand others, irrespective of whether we agree with them or not. Listening in this way requires our undivided attention, using our ears and our eyes. We seek to understand and empathise with our heart.
- Be aware of the need to find common ground  
All too often conflict escalates when motivated by a desire to win, resulting in a win/lose outcome but more likely a lose/lose. As we seek to listen to understand, we move from positional arguments to a shared desire to discover the needs and interests from each other, often resulting in identifying what is shared and valued in common.
- Be aware of the need for face to face dialogue  
All too often disagreements escalate as those involved do not sit down and find a safe space to talk with one another. Car park conversations perpetuate the conflict and the increasing use of emails and social media will all too readily escalate the conflict and heighten misunderstandings and fears. It is in the coming together in a respectful manner, valuing the person, that we are able to hear each other's stories.
- Be aware of the need to forgive  
When in conflict, feeling hurt, loss and pain, we can choose to harm and retaliate. Alternatively, we can choose to heal, tell our story, name the hurt and offer forgiveness and experience the renewal or release of the relationship. Forgiveness is a release, a gift to yourself and your future.

'It is easy to want peace and to love peace. But are we prepared to struggle for peace, to enter into places of conflict? And if we are prepared to enter places of conflict, are we aware that we are vulnerable and can be hurt? Let us try to understand each other. Tell me your story, the story of your pain, and I can tell you my story and somewhere, we will come together.' (Jean Vanier Encountering the 'other')

This is the positive, creative power of conflict to transform our lives and those of others. It is the pathway to reconciliation.

### Further reading and resources

Carolyn Schrock-Shenk and Lawrence Ressler (ed.), *Making Peace with Conflict* (Scottsdale: Harald Press, 1999).

Marshall B Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication* (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2003).

Andrew Atherstone and Andrew Goddard, *Good Disagreement? Grace and Truth in a Divided Church* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2015).

Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving* (London: HarperCollins, 2014).

'Growing through Conflict' course by Place for Hope - [www.placeforhope.ork.uk](http://www.placeforhope.ork.uk)