

# Standing in the Gap



## Engaging Conflict as a Peacemaker

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# Basics of Conflict Transformation

Before an intrepid peacemaker wades into the stormy waters of congregational conflict, it is helpful to have an understanding of (a) conflict generally, (b) how one personally tends to relate to conflict and (c) how congregations tend to relate to conflict. In other words, know thyself and know thy people, especially when stormy waters make it harder for everyone involved to relate to one another according to their best, true self.

In the sections below, we first discuss conflict in general, then how you as an individual tends to engage conflict, and finally how congregations tend to engage conflict. The use of the adverb “tend” is used because there are no final, conclusive ways that an individual or group responds to conflict. In fact, every situation may evoke a different response, though certain tendencies will express themselves overtime. Simply put: hold the descriptions below lightly, as they are helpful to begin a conversation about conflict but cannot describe what conflict will look like in any given situation.

## Paul Lederer: evolving etymology<sup>1</sup>

Paul Lederer, a Mennonite and leading author on the subject of conflict, outlines four stages in the etymology of conflict studies.

Stage one phrase: Conflict Reconciliation

Stage two phrase: Conflict Resolution

Stage three phrase: Conflict Management

Stage four phrase: Conflict Transformation

Lederer demonstrated the limits of each phrase and why a new phrase was sought:

Dilemma of “Conflict Reconciliation”: not every situation can or should be reconciled (e.g. certain personal violations of either a physical or emotional nature).

Dilemma of “Conflict Resolution”: not every conflict can be resolved; even when an agreement is found, said agreement is often a mutually disagreeable compromise.

Dilemma of “Conflict Management:” managing a conflict seems too minimal a goal; some did not like the connotation of mediation as a technocratic act of “management.”

Hope of “Conflict Transformation:” as a term, Conflict Transformation is intended to describe a change in the way conflict occurs and a similar change in the goals of those involved in the conflict.

## Discussion

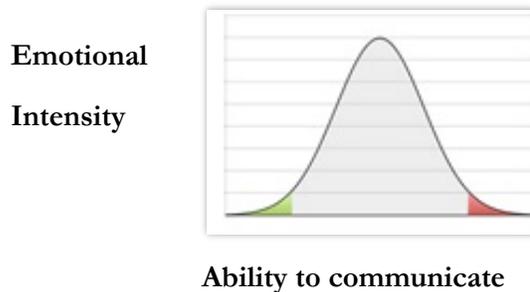
1. Do you agree or disagree with the perceived dilemma associated with each of the first three phrases: explain your affirmation or concern with a particular phrase?
2. Which of the four phrases describes your “default” way of thinking about mediating a conflict? (If you had not heard the dilemma associated with the phrase, which phrase resonates with you most strongly?)

## Conflict and Emotional Intensity

In the graph below, effectiveness of communication rises with strengthening emotion and then falls when emotion overpowers the communicator.

*Positively stated:* the goal is a healthy balance of strong yet self-controlled emotion, able to continue to think in the face of conflict.

*Negatively stated:* the goal is to avoid the polarized extremes of not feeling the need to put effort into communicating (the so-called “Who cares?” phenomenon) versus too much emotion when one is “flooded” and the ability to communicate diminishes (the so-called “How dare you?” phenomenon).



### Discussion

1. Describe a time when you remember a conversation that had too little or too much emotional intensity to create effective engagement of an issue (e.g. a committee meeting).
2. How well do you communicate when there is too little or too much emotional intensity?

## The Language We Use (and our comfort level in using it)

Moving from conflict in general to how one tends to relate to conflict personally, there are a variety of metaphors used in different cultures to describe conflict. Listed below are three phrases that serve as metaphors for conflict.

1. Latin – *Confligere*, which means raging fire
2. Chinese – symbol for *danger and opportunity*
3. Native American – “When the conflict starts, get happy because *conflict often precedes clarity*,” Don Coyis of White Bison.

### Discussion

1. Which phrase best represents your personal perspective on conflict? Explain why you resonate with this phrase.

## Personal Preference Continuum:

Where are you on a scale of 1 to 10?

1 represents “I got this, it's easy” and 10 “I avoid this whenever possible.”

1. Church disagreements that lead to emotional intensity.
2. Situations that lead to one or more people using raised voices.
3. Situations where there is a clear bully in the room and everyone else is silent.
4. Explicit criticism of your work.
5. Implicit criticism of your work.
6. Brainstorming situations where everyone seems to have a different idea and “knows” their idea is the best.
7. When there is strong disagreement between “The Traditionalists” and “The Entrepreneurs.”
8. When there is a high level of uncertainty and church leadership is at a loss for how to move forward.

## Friendly Style Profile<sup>2</sup>

The Friendly Style Profile (FSP) is useful for all leaders, as it helps one understand one's own patterns, habits, and tendencies when engaging conflict as well as recognize the patterns, habits and tendencies. The FSP is designed to tell participants what style they use both in calm and in storm (aka, their “go-to” during ordinary circumstances vs. when there is conflict).

The best way to understand one's FSP is to take the test, which can be purchased online (see endnote below). However, even those who do not take the test can have a sense of how they function. Listed below is a brief summary of each style. As you read each summary, ask yourself, “Is this me? Do I function this way?”

### Accommodating/Harmonizing (blue)

1. Basic Philosophy: If I am sensitive to others' needs, I can expect to be valued as a facilitator to attain our goals
2. Personal Purpose: To be sociable, popular, bring harmony
3. Behaviors: Sensitive, tactful, sociable, flexible
4. Motto: “You can catch more flies with honey than vinegar.”

### Affiliating/Perfecting (yellow)

1. Basic Philosophy: If I work hard in my pursuit of excellence, my worth will be demonstrated.
2. Personal Purpose: To be helpful, team-oriented, seek ideals
3. Behaviors: Cooperative, highly principled, striving for a perfect world
4. Motto: “If it's worth doing, it is worth doing well!”

### Analyzing/Preserving (red)

1. Basic Philosophy: If I take time and locate the necessary information to think it through, I can avoid mistakes or losing what I have secured and add to our accomplishments.
2. Personal Purpose: To be safe, sure, logical: avoid foolishness and failure.
3. Behaviors: Cautious, analytical, systematic, compartmentalizing
4. Motto: “Look before you leap!”

## Achieving/Directing (green)

1. Basic Philosophy: If I skillfully take charge, and lead the way, others will join me and we will achieve good things.
2. Personal Purpose: To be competent, have impact, get things done
3. Behaviors: Initiating, directing, action-oriented
4. Motto: “Nothing ventured, nothing gained!”

## Discussion

1. For each category (e.g. Basic philosophy, etc.) rank in order: from “that’s me” (#1) to “that’s not me” (#4).
2. What is your FSP? (If your “calm” and “storm” differ, choose the style you feel describes you best.)
3. Divide into four groups by profile. Each group is to create a skit, song, poem, “living sculpture” or short essay that describes to the other groups who you are, how you relate to others in the midst of conflict, and why you do what you do! The skit/poem/song should convey how this trait is useful/helpful or not useful/helpful in a church setting.

## Speed Leas 5 Levels of Conflict Intensity<sup>8</sup>

It is also helpful to understand how congregations tend to relate to conflict. Speed Leas described five levels of congregational conflict. These five levels are broadly accurate yet rarely precise, so caution is needed when using them within a congregation.

Leas’ five levels function more as a continuum rather than steps; that is, there is rarely a clear delineation between when one level ends and the next level begins. Different conflict mediators may evaluate the same situation and come to different conclusions regarding “what level the church is at.”

Leas’ five levels is a helpful model, to be used as a tool not as a weapon. As a tool, the model helps a mediator understand the urgency involved with engaging in conflict transformation and provides a sense of where to start. As a weapon, the model labels a congregation, its members, and its leaders, and limits the ability to encounter each other as brothers and sister in Jesus.

### Level One: Problem to Solve

- Specific issues
- Open and honest conversation
- Sharing of ideas

### Level Two: Disagreement

- Self-protections
- Seeking to look good
- Some holding back of ideas
- Some joking with a hard edge

### Level Three: Contest

- Make sure your side wins
- Factions emerge
- Language tends toward assuming things about the situation and/or other people
- Over-generalizing
- Magnifying others’ faults and one’s own strengths—both as people and the positions held

#### Level Four: Fight or Flight

- Seeking to break the relationship
- Strong desire to punish or detach—other must go or I will leave
- Question others' integrity

#### Level Five: Intractable

- Goal becomes to destroy the other—take their job, their reputation, and their well-being
- The ends justify the means

### Discussion

1. When and for what issues does your congregation tend to engage in “problems to solve” (level 1) or “disagreements” (level 2)?
2. When and for what issues has your congregation escalated to “contest” (level 3)?

## Church Continuum

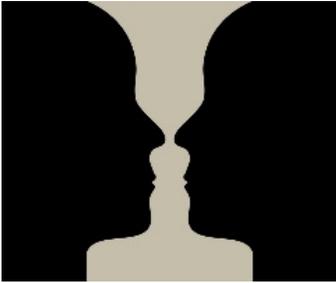
### Where is your church on a scale of 1 to 10?

**1 represents strong agreement with the 1st statement and 10 represents strong agreement with the second.**

1. Disagreement means a lack of respect or caring vs. Disagreement means engagement and involvement.
2. Leaders should discourage differences vs. Leaders should encourage differences.
3. In stress created by change, only a few voices are heard vs. In stress created by change, many voices are heard.
4. In stress created by change, direct dialogue decreases and indirect dialogue (triangling) increases vs. In stress created by change, direct dialogue increases.
5. It is common for individuals to react defensively or explosively toward the views of others vs. It is common for individuals to react calmly and thoughtfully toward the views of others.
6. It is common for individuals to speak for others: “Everyone thinks...” vs. It is common for individuals to speak for themselves only.
7. It is common for groups to focus primarily on solutions or positions vs. It is common for groups to focus on the process: “What are our needs?” “How can we creatively fulfill multiple interests...?”
8. In my congregation, timing is uneven – delay, delay, then rush at the end vs. In my congregation, timing is steady – plan, discuss, and decide in due course.
9. Past conflicts are either never discussed or are talked about in black/white terms vs. Individuals are aware of past hurts, own their role in past conflicts, and take responsibility not to project the past into the present.

# Engaging Conflict: Three Perspectives

## Perspective Taking



Perspective taking is the ability to view an issue from multiple perspectives. The goal of perspective taking is to build a bridge of understanding and connection with another. It does not matter if you agree or disagree, the mere fact that one can see and hear from another's perspective creates an opportunity for dialogue that invites clarity and depth of sharing.

Perspective taking can be talked about in a variety of colloquial ways—walking a mile in another's shoes or seeing through another's eyes, for example. Both of these phrases assume certain practices: honoring the experience of another, adopting the same frame of reference, and seeking to understand the “logic”—be it rational thought, emotion, or intuition—someone else is using. Perspective taking, therefore, is difficult work and requires humility, respect, and curiosity.

At more advanced levels, perspective taking moves beyond mere observation of another's views and seeks to integrate one's own and another's experiences, thoughts, and feelings toward building a bridge of connection and understanding. It may never be possible to get to agreement with another, but it is usually possible to clarify our commonalities and specify our areas of difference. The work of moving toward more advanced levels of perspective taking can be described in terms of seeing, speaking, and choosing.

### “See”

1. Mirror *another's* perspective.
2. Name your *own* perspective.

### “Speak”

1. Seek to be able to articulate another's perspective (mirroring) toward the goal of understanding why it makes sense to the other (validating) even if it does not make sense to you.
2. Seek to articulate the strengths, weaknesses, and questions related to your own perspective.

### “Choose”

1. With respect – being able to acknowledge and validate another's perspective does not mean we agree with it.
2. “God alone is Lord of the conscience” requires that, at some point, we must take a principled stand.

As an exercise in perspective taking, what might be the perspectives of the following persons on the topics listed below? Can you imagine how their different perspectives create different viewpoints, concerns, and needs?

Topic: Children in the worship service:

- a. Pastor who is easily distracted (or one who is obliviousness to noise)
- b. Child
- c. Visitor
- d. Older adult

Topic: How the pastor spends her or his time:

- a. Pastor
- b. Member in hospital
- c. Church staff
- d. Pastor's family
- e. United Way staff person
- f. Worship chairperson

Topic: Immigration:

- a. Border Patrol officer
- b. Honduran migrant
- c. Rancher
- d. "Liberal" or "Conservative" pastor
- e. School teacher in a border elementary school
- f. Mayor
- g. Farmer

## Narrative Awareness



Narrative awareness is grounded in the truth that no one has direct, unmediated access to "facts." Rather, all facts are mediated through the story we tell ourselves about the facts. But what story are we telling ourselves? Stated as a math equation we might say:  $\text{Facts} + \text{Story} = \text{Feeling} / \text{Reaction}$ .

We often *infer motivation* or *impute motivation* that is actually unknown and may be quite different from another's actual motivation. The motive we assign to another is often guided by the *Fundamental Attribution Error*—the notion that we assign negative motives to others and assign innocent motives to ourselves. Beyond dilemmas about misattributing someone's motives, facts are also mediated by our *perception* of events, which can be influenced by our perspective (see above). The combination of inferred or imputed motivation and facts filtered through limited perception of events often creates a distorted narrative, which impacts how we feel about a situation.

The narrative we tell ourselves influences how we *feel* about a situation. The same set of facts can lead to widely disparate feelings and reactions depending upon the narrative we have told ourselves about a situation. For example, imagine a pastor who spoke harshly to a parishioner (the circumstances are not all that important). Depending on the narrative one tells oneself, the following responses are conceivable:

1. Story: The pastor verbally abused the parishioner = anger
2. Story: The pastor was protecting his family = compassion
3. Story: The pastor made an error = compassion with rebuke / rebuke with compassion
4. Story: The pastor just lost her or his mother = compassion
5. Story: This is a pattern with this pastor = anger

Signs that we might be distorting another's narrative rather than allowing the other person to convey her/his narrative can be discerned by certain kinds of statements. For example, the following statements are each symptomatic that one is imputing a motivation onto the facts in order to create a narrative:

1. “I think he does it because...” (Do you know this to be true or is this supposition?)
2. “My guess is that it makes her feel...” (The key word here is “guess.”)
3. I don’t understand why they did that unless...” (This sentence describes an act of imagination)

To begin to notice when you or another distorts a narrative through misguided inference or imputation of a motive that is not explicitly known, it is helpful to ask certain questions for self-reflection:

1. What was the narrative we told ourselves about the most recent conflict we had in the church?
2. Is there a *common theme* to the narratives we tell ourselves when in conflict?
3. How adept are we at recognizing when *other* people are inferring or imputing a narrative?
4. How comfortable are we at *inviting others* to reflect on their narratives and/or share them with us? (Brene Brown calls this “inviting people to rumble.”)<sup>4</sup>

## Interest-Based Negotiating



The Parable of the Two Sisters with One Orange tells how two sisters spent a rainy day arguing over one orange. Back and forth the sisters bickered until mom and dad stepped in to demand quiet. The parents were stumped and felt they had no choice but to sit and listen to their daughters’ complaints against each other. After listening to both sisters, it became clear to mom the sisters held incompatible *positions* (i.e. they each wanted the orange) but compatible *interests*. Can you guess their compatible interests? The older sister wanted the peel for baking, while the younger sister wanted the fruit for eating!

Position-based argumentation is the norm for many congregational conversations (and certainly for congregational conflicts). We see position-based argumentation in politics all the time: “Build the Wall! versus “Don’t build the Wall!” “Lower taxes!” versus “Less money for the military!” We see position-based argumentation in churches all the time, too: “More money for Sunday School” versus “More money for mission.” “We need new hymnals” versus “I like the old hymnals.” The symptoms of position-based argumentation are:<sup>5</sup>

1. Goal is victory,
2. Reactive to others,
3. Do most (all?) the talking,
4. Insist on your rightness,
5. Insist on your position,
6. Refuse to consider alternatives,
7. A contest of wills.

Interest-based negotiation contrasts with such positional thinking by asking the question about the different needs and values each party brings to a dialogue. Using border security as an example, we might discern the interests as national security, compassion to the foreigner, national identity, the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, the rule of law, the Law of Love, etc. Church examples might discuss interests as anxiety about our diminishing Sunday School attendance, a core value to support our Sunday School attendance, a core value about stewardship, the feeling that “mission is the fuel of the church,” the desire to feel as if we are moving forward with culture rather than be left behind, the fear that we are abandoning our tradition and identity to move forward with culture, the love of two of the new hymns in the new hymnal, the love of three of the old hymns that are not in the new hymnal, etc.

Interest-based negotiation complexifies an argument in a helpful manner. Through introducing complexity, interest-based negotiation also introduces depth and breadth to a dialogue, creating opportunities for creative, win-win scenarios. Here are the characteristics of interest-based negotiation:<sup>6</sup>

1. Parties are problem solvers
2. Listen actively
3. Clarify, clarify, clarify concerns
4. Explore interests
5. Highlight shared interests
6. Brainstorm and use creativity
7. Agreement seeks to satisfy each interest

The person committed to interest-based negotiation will be committed also to self-awareness, asking,

1. Do I listen *both* at the surface level *and* “between the lines”?
2. Do I seek to enter into another’s perspective, to listen from her/his point of view?
3. Do I ask myself, “What do I really want here? What are my actual hopes, concerns, convictions, and needs?”

## Engaging Conflict: Methods

Stop! Don't engage...don't even think about it.

The first rule of medicine is "First, do no harm." This is the same rule that should be observed when engaging congregational disputes. Before any discussion about methods for congregational mediation can be reviewed, it is necessary for church leaders to distinguish between what can and cannot be mediated as some issues and situations do not lend themselves to being negotiable. Seeking to mediate certain circumstances will reinforce patterns of abuse, while in other circumstances both the mediators and parties involved will be frustrated by the inherent difficulties of trying to mediate what are too personal and/or value laden to be negotiable.

### The Limits of Mediation

Listed below is a list of common situations divided into three categories:<sup>7</sup>

- What can be negotiated,
- What can be discussed but not negotiated, and
- What cannot be negotiated.

### Common Types of Negotiable Issues

1. Behaviors
  - a. How people treat each other
  - b. Sharing space
  - c. Respecting boundaries
  - d. Communicating about problems
  - e. Noise
  - f. Following through on promises and responsibilities
2. Things
  - a. Property
  - b. Repairs, maintenance
  - c. Loans
  - d. Reimbursement
  - e. Arranging payments
3. Structure and systems
  - a. How decisions are made
  - b. Rules and regulations
  - c. Procedures
  - d. Schedules
  - e. Job responsibilities

## Concerns that Can Be Discussed but not Typically Negotiated

2. Beliefs
  - a. Principles, values
  - b. Child-raising philosophy
  - c. Prejudices
3. Personalities
  - a. Personal style
  - b. Management style
  - c. Attitudes
4. Emotions
  - a. Anger
  - b. Hurt feelings
  - c. Trust
  - d. Blame, fault
5. Perceptions
  - a. What “really” happened
  - b. Interpretations
  - c. Right from wrong

## Issues that Cannot Be Mediated (and are likely to create further harm)

1. Addictive behaviors
2. Pathological or abusive behaviors
3. Wide gap in power between the parties
4. Issues where the real decision-maker is not present: where people whose cooperation is needed, or who may be significantly impacted by a decision, are not represented
5. Issues requiring investigation and disclosure before fair negotiation can take place

### Evaluate Scenarios in Quads<sup>8</sup>

Divide into quads. Each group is to discuss the scenarios that begin on the next page to determine which scenarios are (1) negotiable, (2) discussable but not negotiable, or (3) not negotiable.

Note: Some of the scenarios lend themselves to a single answer, while other scenarios blend multiple components. Good Luck!

### **Scenario 1: Leadership Expectations**

The Session of First Church had gone through three pastors in five years, and the elders were frustrated with Pastor D's leadership of their meetings. Among the complaints the elders had were that Pastor D was perpetually late to the meetings, did not start them immediately upon arrival, and seemed to like to chit-chat about the agenda. The elders did not like that Pastor D seemed to comment on every issue and motion that was discussed and allowed debate on motions to go on "interminably."

Pastor D was also frustrated. S/he served a yoked parish and had to drive across town to get to First Church. Sometimes pastoral care responsibilities required him/her to be a "wee bit tardy" to meetings. Even worse, Pastor D felt the elders were so focused on the business aspects of the meetings they were failing to bond with one another. Pastor D felt the Session needed to have a stronger sense of fellowship and togetherness.

### **Scenario 2: Property Committee Processes**

The Property Committee chairperson also served as the lead sound technician, the HVAC repair technician, and once a month took a turn counting the Sunday offering. As someone who tended to over-function as a leader, the chairperson had seen his/her committee dwindle from seven members with monthly meetings to three members, and they met only when the chair called. They had not met in four months. Pastor E was concerned about what was happening with the Property Committee but upon approaching the Property Chair was told, "Everything is working, right? You need to mind your own business." Pastor E, knowing the Session planned to ask each committee to prepare a budget request for the coming year's budget, insisted the Property chairperson convene a meeting of the entire committee and personally reach out to invite the participation of the four members who had resigned over the last year.

### **Scenario 3: Youth Director and Finance Director**

The youth director liked to keep business receipts until the envelope in which they were stored was bulging so that the "busy work" of seeking reimbursement only occurred occasionally. Only once the envelope was full would the youth director turn the receipts into the finance secretary. The youth director's practice drove the finance secretary crazy, as it was finance secretary's opinion that receipts should be turned in monthly.

The finance secretary felt the youth director was unnecessarily adding to her/his workload and creating stress that was affecting her/his health. The finance secretary confronted the youth director about being disorganized, irresponsible, and of not caring about other people. The youth director responded by accusing the finance secretary of caring more about rules than the people with whom s/he worked.

### **Scenario 4: What to Preach**

The senior pastor was livid at his newly ordained associate pastor. He had allowed her the privilege of the pulpit at Tall Steeple Church, the large, affluent, suburban congregation he had led for 18 years. He felt she had abused the privilege by raising the issue of gender inequality. He called her into his office on Monday morning to explain to her the kind of preaching he expected of her. The associate pastor complained to the chair of the Personnel Committee, who said she would schedule a meeting to discuss the issue with her. When the associate pastor arrived in the church's conference room for the meeting, she was welcomed by the chair of Personnel and the senior pastor.

### **Scenario 5: Get Off My Lawn!**

Associate Pastor H was single and a recent seminary graduate who arrived at the church in December and moved into the three-bedroom manse that had been vacant for the past two years during the interim period. When negotiating terms of call Associate Pastor H had requested that the custodian, who mowed the church's lawn and had been mowing the manse's lawn using a large tractor mower, continue to mow the manse lawn. Without consulting the Session, the senior pastor promised Associate Pastor H the custodian would continue the same practice. For the first few months of Associate Pastor H's ministry, the condition of the manse lawn was not an issue because s/he had moved in at the beginning of winter. However, six weeks into Spring, the chair of the Building Committee approached Associate Pastor H, saying several church members had complained about the state of the manse lawn.

### **Scenario 6: LGBTQ Opinions**

The Presbytery of Blessed Polity was in turmoil over whether or not to ordain an LGBTQ candidate for ministry. Candidate P, having just graduated from seminary, was the unanimous choice of First Church's Pastor Nominating Committee and had been elected by the congregation with a vote of 87% approval. The following arguments were made from the floor of the Presbytery:

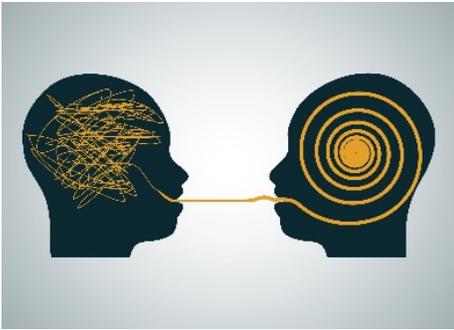
- Elder Q made an impassioned plea for traditional, biblical values, and argued for a no vote.
- Pastor R argued that "local option" meant First Church could call anyone they wanted.
- Pastor S argued that "local option" still gave the Presbytery permission to vote no.
- Pastor T said s/he didn't have a problem ordaining Candidate P but that 87% of the vote was too small a percentage of yes votes, especially for someone who would be newly ordained. Pastor T had nothing against Candidate P but could not in good conscience vote yes.
- Elder U threatened to resign immediately from the PCUSA if the Presbytery refused to ordain Candidate P.
- Elder V threatened to resign immediately from the PCUSA if the Presbytery granted permission to ordain Candidate P.

The meeting erupted into chaos.

At this point in the meeting, the Presbytery Pastor suggested a time of silence for prayer. Following the time of silence, the Moderator prayed for the presbytery and for peace, unity and purity. Following the prayer, discussion resumed, and Candidate P was approved for membership in the Presbytery and for ordination.

Candidate P contacted the Presbytery Pastor the following week about getting together to discuss what had happened at the presbytery meeting. They scheduled an appointment at a Starbucks. During their coffee chat, they decided together the Presbytery Pastor would contact everyone who had spoken on the floor of the Presbytery, asking if they would be willing to talk about what had occurred. Candidate P wanted to hear everyone's perspective more deeply and be able to learn from their insights, even if people disagreed with one another.

## Mediation Rhythms for Small and Mid-Sized Groups<sup>9</sup>



Plan A for a healthy habit among leaders is active listening and self-differentiated speech that leads to healthy dialogue and decision-making. Plan A does not always happen.

Plan B is to be able to facilitate open, honest, and respectful conversations among people who are in conflict or otherwise struggling to communicate with one another. Plan B requires church leaders learn the skill of facilitating mediation. Skill in mediation is akin to removing the static from the phone line of communication to replace it with a clear signal.

There are several varieties of mediation, including one-to-one, small and large group mediations. Further, there are a variety of techniques one can use for these different kinds of mediation. Rather than become an expert in a particular mediation technique, however, the authors suggest leaders become familiar and comfortable with the basic concepts of leading a mediation—what we call mediation rhythms.

Whether engaging couples, small groups, or large groups, there are certain best practices or preferred rhythms for facilitating tense or conflicted conversations. Listed below are the best practices:

1. **Round Robin:** each person is asked to share their perspective/experience/opinion. There is no response, dialogue or pushback other than, “Thank you for sharing.” Go around the room until everyone has had a chance to speak.
2. **One at a time:** no cross-talk allowed.
3. **Speak directly to the mediator:** observing this practice invites the speaker to modulate her or his emotions toward calmer presentation rather than amplify one’s emotions for the sake of the group. Speaking to the group almost inevitably leads toward emotional recruitment whereas speaking to the moderator invites self-differentiation.
4. **Document:** mediators should document what people say in language that closely approximates the words used.
5. **Reflective Listening:** the mediator should reflect back to each speaker the content of what the person has said to assure them that they are being heard.
6. **Mediator Summarize Issues:** the mediator should summarize all significant issues that have been raised by the group and ask the group if she or he got it right. Allow for feedback.
7. **Address one issue at a time:** in order to provide focus and boundaries for issues, only one issue should be discussed at a time. Allowing two or more issues to be discussed simultaneously leads to a lack of clarity and . When addressing an issue, use the acronym BEND:
  - a. **Brainstorm**
  - b. **Evaluate**
  - c. **Negotiate**
  - d. **Decide**

## Neutralizing History: healing woundedness

Neutralizing History is an exercise that can be used when two or more people have grievances against one another that are difficult or impossible to “solve.” This exercise invites the aggrieved people to have a conversation guided by a third-party facilitator in an emotionally safe environment. The purpose of neutralizing history is for participants,

- to hear and be heard,
- to share feelings and request actions,
- to express chagrin, regret and confession,
- to offer and receive forgiveness.

Neutralizing history is used to address competing, mutually exclusive narratives about what participants believe has happened in the past. It differs from mediation by employing the principles or frames of reference listed below.

- Neutralizing history is **NOT** about trying to figure out “what really happened.” It is assumed no video of the event exists—only people’s memories, feelings, and narratives.
- Neutralizing history is **NOT** about “relitigating the past.” Trying to assign blame is counter-productive and usually impossible in highly conflicted, he said-she said situations.
- Neutralizing history **IS** about being heard by another and, likewise, hearing her or him at a deep level.
- Neutralizing history **INVITES** regret, confession and forgiveness from all parties.
- Neutralizing history encourages people to **COVENANT** to practice certain behaviors, respect particular boundaries, etc. as individuals move forward.

The Neutralizing history exercise uses the same rhythms and practices as a group mediation (see below).

1. **Round Robin:** each person is asked to share her or his perspective/experience/opinion. There is no response, dialogue or pushback other than, “Thank you for sharing.” Go around the room until everyone has had a chance to speak.
2. **One at a time:** no cross-talk allowed.
3. **Speak directly to the mediator:** observing this practice invites the speaker to modulate her or his emotions toward calmer presentation rather than amplify one’s emotions for the sake of the group. Speaking to the group almost inevitably leads toward emotional recruitment whereas speaking to the moderator invites self-differentiation.
4. **Document:** lead mediator documents what people say in language that closely approximates the words used.
5. **Reflective Listening:** the mediator reflects back to each speaker the content of what the person has said to assure she or he is being heard. Once the mediator has reflected back to a speaker the content of what the person has shared, other participants are asked to do the same.
6. **Mediator Summarize Issues:** lead mediator summarizes all significant issues that have been raised by the group and asks the group if the summary is accurate. The mediator allows for feedback both from participants and co-facilitator.

7. **Address one issue at a time:** in order to provide focus and boundaries around issues, only one issue is discussed at a time. Allowing two or more issues to be discussed simultaneously creates miscommunication and lack of clarity.

#### *A NOTE ON FACILITATING A NEUTRALIZING HISTORY EXERCISE:*

Neutralizing history is a two-person facilitation and should not be attempted alone. The emotional volatility inherent in the exercise means one person will find it difficult to observe all that is going on verbally and non-verbally within and between participants while also managing their own emotional reactivity.

The preferred way to structure the exercise is to have the participants sit side by side to one another facing the lead facilitator, who will manage the conversation. A white board or several large sheets of paper should be placed behind the lead facilitator for when they summarize the issues they have heard. Meanwhile, the co-facilitator should be placed to the side of the participants and lead facilitator (as the point of a triangle) in the peripheral vision of all. Such placement allows the co-facilitator to observe all parties unobtrusively without drawing focus away from the conversation, while still able to engage the conversation when necessary.

## Mediation Rhythms for Large Groups

In addition to the methods appropriate for a smaller number of participants described above, there are several methods appropriate for larger groups. The methods described below do not require that everyone in the room be given voice but does require that everyone in the room be actively listening, observing respectful speech (if they are given such permission), and engage as participants in the mediation even if they are not directly involved.

The three mediation rhythms listed below are listed in order of their ease of use, with Interviews being the easiest to facilitate and the Samoan Circle being the most complicated. We encourage facilitators to be comfortable with their ability and confident they can facilitate these exercises. When in doubt, seek assistance from a more seasoned facilitator.

1. **Interviews:** invite one person to come to the front of the room. While the rest of the group watches in silence, without interruption, the mediator interviews the person face to face in order to allow the entire group to hear a perspective, experience, position and interest at both a breadth and depth level. Multiple interviews can be scheduled for the same meeting or the interview technique can be used at successive meetings.
2. **Role Reversal Interviews:** this is the same technique as above only the person being interviewed is asked to adopt a perspective or role different from the one she or he holds (usually the opposite role). The facilitator may need to coax or coach a participant in order for the participant to get into their role. Such coaxing and coaching is not cajoling but kind, gentle encouragement that helps the participant reframe their perspective.
3. **Samoan Circle:** the Samoan Circle is similar to a neutralizing history with an audience.
  - a. Four chairs are placed facing each other in a 2 x 2 configuration in the front of the room. Participants must be in one of these chairs to speak and are allowed to request the participation of others in the room, who come sit in the chairs and participate in a conversation.
  - b. The mediator moderates the conversation toward the goal of allowing people to speak complaints with kindness and respect, while inviting regret, confession and forgiveness from all.
  - c. Participants are invited to write their complaints on 3 x 5 cards as I-statements. They speak their I-statement to another participant sitting in one of the chairs.

- d. After a complaint has been expressed, the listener responds by mirroring back the complainant's concerns. The mediator will ask the complainant, "Are you ready to hand me your card?" If not, further conversation ensues. At the end of the conversation, the mediator asks both/all parties, "Is there any regret or confession you would like to express to another?"
- e. Once someone has received an invitation to the front of the room and participated in a conversation, they are given the opportunity to invite someone else from the congregation to come forward for conversation. The process is repeated until all conversations that need to happen have occurred or until the covenanted time for ending the process arrives.

# Mediation Scenarios: Roleplays

## Scenario 1: Work Styles

Associate Pastor J and the Youth Director share an office and have quite different work styles. While they are both extroverts, Pastor J is seminary-trained with years of experience in professional youth ministry, and s/he believes youth ministry requires in-depth Bible study at every meeting. Pastor J, who has two children, no longer works directly with the youth group, but due to her/his experience has been assigned to supervise the Youth Director. The youth director does not have a college degree, nor does s/he have children. The Youth Director's primary giftedness for the job is her/his passion for nurturing young people toward Christ. The youth relate to the Youth Director almost like a favorite aunt/uncle and enjoy that s/he takes them to coffee as a group, where they talk about their lives and the challenges they face. The Youth Director blends Bible lessons into these conversations.

When the Interim Pastor K left for a week of study leave, Pastor J was tasked with moderating the Session meeting and figured this was her/his opportunity to confront what s/he considered to be the unprofessional manner in which the youth ministry was being led. Working closely with the chair of the Children and Youth Discipleship Team, Pastor J had the chair raise "serious concerns," which ultimately led to the Session voting at the meeting to fire the Youth Director. Interim Pastor K returned from study leave to discover "all hell had broken loose" at the church.

### *Role Players*

- Associate Pastor J
- Youth Director L
- Interim Pastor K (optional)
- Chair of the Children (optional)
- Youth Discipleship Team (optional)

## Scenario 2: Planning Worship

The Chancel Choir Director approached Pastor L about adding an additional anthem for the worship service on Fall Kick-Off Sunday. Pastor L was concerned about the time it would add to the service because the bell choir was also ringing that Sunday. Pastor L didn't like saying no to the Chancel Choir Director, whom everyone liked and thought did a great job, and so agreed to the request. The Chancel Choir Director assured Pastor L s/he would choose a shorter anthem that was "practically an Introit." The Bell Choir Director was upset when s/he heard about the change to the service because s/he had been instructed by Pastor L to choose a shorter bell piece "because time is going to be tight." The Bell Choir Director complained to the bell choir at their rehearsal on Tuesday evening. The ringers all agreed with her/him that this kind of change was typical and really unfair. The Chancel Choir Director had the chancel choir rehearse the new anthem at their rehearsal on Wednesday evening, and the choir was delighted to get to highlight their gifts with another piece. Having stewed upon the injustice for two days, the Bell Choir Director stormed into Pastor L's office on Thursday morning and complained. Pastor L agreed with the Bell Choir Director and had the church secretary delete the new anthem from the bulletin.

### *Role Players*

Pastor L  
Chancel Choir Director  
Bell Choir Director

### **Scenario 3: Rewriting Policy**

The Personnel Committee had worked for several months to revise and update the church's personnel policy. The committee had distributed two draft versions of the revised policy to staff and elders and requested feedback on both draft version 1.0 and draft version 2.0. The Personnel Committee sought to be responsive to the suggested edits. The Personnel Committee was pleased to distribute to the Session version 3.0, which they assumed would be the final version, and hoped the Session would approve the new personnel policy at the October Session meeting. Still, in order to give everyone a final chance to suggest an edit, the committee distributed version 3.0 at the September Session meeting.

Elder M was a retired attorney and had been in and out of the hospital all summer and was finally feeling better. A week before the October Session meeting, Elder M opened her/his email and was pleased to find the proposed personnel policy revision, which Elder M agreed was long overdue. Elder M noted the document was called "Version 3.0" and called Pastor N to ask questions about it. Pastor N said it was just a routine update and that the Session would discuss it next week.

Elder M dusted off her/his lawyer skills and made 17 corrections. Elder M brought her/his marked-up copy to the October Session meeting and handed it to the Personnel Committee chairperson. Elder M was surprised and taken aback when the Personnel Committee Chairperson exploded in anger.

### *Role Players*

Personnel Committee Chairperson  
Elder M  
Pastor N

### **Scenario 4: Mission Trip**

The Mission Team had recently introduced the Family Promise ministry to First Church. Family Promise is a ministry in which churches host homeless families for one week. Throughout the week different church members volunteer to prepare dinner, breakfast and spend the night with the families on the church campus. Each of the first three times First Church had hosted Family Promise had been a rousing success, with lots of volunteers and good energy. However, the last five times First Church had hosted, the numbers of volunteers decreased, and people were beginning to resent having "to take our turn again already." Pastor W called for a "mission summit" to discuss the situation. Present at the meeting were the following people:

- Elder X, the mission team chairperson, who was frustrated by the congregation's lack of compassion.
- Member Y, who was a parent of young children and concerned about his/her kids' safety.
- Member Z, the building team chairperson, who was frustrated by the additional utilities and maintenance costs associated with hosting "a bunch of homeless."

- Pastor W, who had longed to guide the congregation away from “checkbox missions” and toward “real, person-to-person ministry,” and who feared if their efforts with Family Promise failed, the church would never be willing to try such a ministry again.
- The Family Promise representative, who had heard before, many times, everything that was about to be said at the mission summit.

*Role Players*

Elder X  
 Pastor W  
 Member Y  
 Member Z  
 Family Promise representative (optional for role play)

**Scenario 5: Children in Church**

Pastor F and Pastor G were a clergy couple, recent seminary graduates, newly arrived at First Church, which was their first call. They were delighted to serve this older congregation full of the saints. Both Pastor F and Pastor G were committed to getting to know their church, its gifts, and the needs of the community. They looked forward to raising their family in the community and were expecting a child in the next few months. The first signs of trouble occurred when Pastor G suggested the children be allowed to remain in the worship service rather than sent to “children’s church” following the second hymn. Elder D argued vociferously that children had never been allowed in worship, and they wouldn’t start on her/his watch. The trouble erupted into a full-blown crisis the first time the nursery worker brought the pastors’ newborn into the sanctuary so that Pastor G could nurse her infant.

*Role Players*

Pastor F  
 Elder D  
 Pastor G  
 Nursery Attendant (optional)

**Scenario 6: Worship Start Times**

The Worship Committee came to the Session meeting with a proposal to change the worship times. They told the Session they had been doing lots of study on the issue and had learned research on churches indicated their 11:00 worship service was too late in the morning. Moreover, the research suggested that an “odd” start time is more memorable and brings more attention to a church, so the Worship Committee Chairperson made a motion to change the start time for the worship service to 9:45 beginning the Sunday after Labor Day. Following robust debate, the Session approved the motion. Here are some of the reactions to the decision:

- Pastor O was angry that s/he had not been alerted to the fact the Worship Committee was discussing a change to the worship times. Pastor O drove to First Church from another community and now her/his Sunday mornings would be much more difficult to manage.
- The Sunday School teachers were angry because, not only had they not been consulted, but the change to the worship times meant that worship and Sunday School would happen simultaneously. They would have to choose between worship and teaching Sunday School.

- Some of the parents were pleased with the proposed change because it meant they only had to give up one hour for church when they came.
- Some of the parents were not pleased at all with the proposed change because it meant their children wouldn't get to be in worship with them—either that or they would have to miss Sunday School.
- Several members of the congregation didn't like that the change in worship times was thrust upon them without their having any chance to give input. These members told Pastor O, "That's not how we make decisions at First Church."

*Role Players*

Worship Committee Chair

Sunday School Director

Pastor

Parent in favor of change

Parent against the change

Disgruntled church member who wants to give feedback

# Transition, Conflict, and Emotional Intensity in the Scriptures

*Where, O where, is emotional intensity found in the Word?*

**Torah:** Cain and Abel, Joseph and his brothers...can you think of others?

**Writings:** Esther! Ruth! Ezra!...can you think of others?

**Prophets:** Amos! Hosea! Jeremiah!...can you think of others?

**Gospels:** Blessed are the peacemakers, Forgive 7 times 70...can you think of others?

**Acts:** Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), Creation of Deacons...can you think of others?

**Letters:** Galatians! Corinthians! Love is patient? When did that happen?

*An admonition for how we are to relate to one another:* Read **Matthew 18:15-22**. Where do you see the following qualities in the text?

- The spirit of forgiveness is a virtue.
- Jesus is with us in the midst of our conflicts.
- Direct communication is best!

*Self-reflection questions:*

- Are you talking to or about the person with whom you have a concern?
- Are you able to express your concern only without speaking for other people?
- Are you able to request a specific, actionable, and appropriate response from the person with whom you have a concern?

*An example of what respectful dialogue when debating an ethical standard looks like:* Read **Acts 15:1-35**. Where do you see the following qualities in the text?

- Dialogue and discussion are gifts of community.
- Disputes and disagreements in the church are nothing new.
- Open dialogue is a matter of speaking and listening with grace and humility.

*Self-reflection questions:*

- Do you offer sufficient time to allow everyone to speak who wishes to do so?
- Do you invite others' opinions, especially opinions of those who have a different perspective?
- Do you listen – deeply and empathetically – to what others have to say?

*An example of Christian community working the problem well:* Read **Acts 6:1-7**. Where do you see the following in the text?

- Problems arise - certain widows were being ignored.
- There were competing needs or interests between the apostles and the people.
- They found a creative solution that met both parties' needs and interests.

*Self-reflection questions:*

- Do you listen both at the surface level and “between the lines”?
- Do you seek to enter into the other’s perspective, to listen from her or his point of view?
- Do you ask yourself, “What do I really want here? What are my actual hopes, concerns, and needs in this situation?”

*On the influence of the narratives we tell ourselves:* Read **Genesis 38:6 – 26**. What story does Judah initially tell himself about Tamar, and how does that story change in verses 25–26?

*On the power of relating to one another in transformational rather than transactional ways:* Read **John 9:1-41**. Assess what kind of relationships are conveyed by the various people found in this chapter. Do they relate to the man born blind according to I-Thou or I-It relationships?

*On the power of Christian community:* Read **1 Corinthians 12:4-27**. How do these verses convey a sense of the interconnectedness of Christians as well as the differentiation among Christians?

*On the power of vulnerability, community and respect:* Read **Philippians 2:1-8**. List all the ways these verses express or invite a spirituality of respect. Describe someone you know or have known who exemplifies the spirituality of respect.

*On the danger of self-delusion:* Read **Luke 18:9-14** and **Matthew 7:3-5**. What do these verses suggest about the human tendency to self-justify? Are you more prone to “miss the log” in your own eye or “see the speck” in another’s?

*On the emotional reactions typical of transition:* Read **Exodus 3:10-11; 13:17; 16:2-3 and 32:1**. What is the role of fear in these reactions? When are these most likely to show up in yourself—what kind of situations tend to evoke them?

*On the power of self-differentiation to create health:* Read **Esther 4:9-14** and **8:3-8**. Given what had happened to her predecessor, Queen Vashti, what emotions do you imagine Esther felt before, during and after her encounter with the king? What core values do you think guided Esther?

*On the influence of perspective and narrative to shape, form, and guide:* Read **Psalms 137 and 139**. Compare and contrast the psalmist’s assumptions and focus. How does where they are looking and what they are expecting influence their ability to move forward versus be stuck?

# Be Who You Are Bible Study

Being a leader in God’s church requires a strong sense of the values you hold most dear: What do you believe about God? About ministry? About what it means to participate in leading the people of God?

Being a leader in God’s church also requires a strong connection to those around you: How is my flock? How are the sheep of God’s pasture doing? What does the Good Shepherd, Jesus, need from me for their blessing?

Being a leader in God’s church, therefore, requires both a strong sense of self and connection to others. Family systems theory describes this blend with the following equation: self-definition + connection = self-differentiation. To encourage self-differentiation, Family Systems Theory encourages leaders to use the tools of noticing and wondering about what they observe. Further, clarification of one’s core values is the preferred means of communicating.

The Bible study method described below incorporates these family system tools of “I notice that…” and “I wonder about…” as well as the tools of “I think,” “I value,” and “What you can expect from me is…”

Use the tools below for your Bible study to strengthen your clarity regarding the values you hold most dear and how God would have you use them to be an instrument of blessing as a pastoral leader.

## **I NOTICE 20 things about this passage. Focus = DATA and DETAILS**

Write 20 observations about the passage’s textual or literary content (e.g. “The word joy is repeated,” “The speaker is Moses,” “The younger son went to a distant country”). Focus only on the text’s content but not meaning or ethics (e.g. Not, “I think this means,” “What I hear God saying…”). There will be an opportunity to focus on meaning and action in later steps.

- |           |           |
|-----------|-----------|
| 1. _____  | 11. _____ |
| 2. _____  | 12. _____ |
| 3. _____  | 13. _____ |
| 4. _____  | 14. _____ |
| 5. _____  | 15. _____ |
| 6. _____  | 16. _____ |
| 7. _____  | 17. _____ |
| 8. _____  | 18. _____ |
| 9. _____  | 19. _____ |
| 10. _____ | 20. _____ |

**I WONDER 10 things about this passage. Focus = QUESTIONS**

Write 10 questions about the passage. Questions can focus on textual content, theological meaning, or ethical expression (e.g. “I wonder about how this passage relates to Psalm 119?” “I wonder why David was so angry?”)

- |          |           |
|----------|-----------|
| 1. _____ | 6. _____  |
| 2. _____ | 7. _____  |
| 3. _____ | 8. _____  |
| 4. _____ | 9. _____  |
| 5. _____ | 10. _____ |

**I THINK five thoughts about this passage. Focus = CLARITY and COHERENCE**

Write five statements about what this passage means. These five statements are the cognitive and intellectual expressions of your engaging Scripture (e.g. “This passage expresses God’s mercy,” “God hates injustice.”).

- |          |          |
|----------|----------|
| 1. _____ |          |
| 2. _____ | 4. _____ |
| 3. _____ | 5. _____ |

**I VALUE these two ideals that call to me in this passage. Focus = CORE CONVICTIONS**

Write the two values to which you are being called by this passage (e.g. “I am called to express humility,” “God wants me to value corporate unity”). There may be many values implicit in the passage, but only write the two values to which you are most strongly being called today.

- |          |          |
|----------|----------|
| 1. _____ | 2. _____ |
|----------|----------|

**The one thing you can EXPECT from me as a response to this passage is \_\_\_\_\_. Focus = ACTION**

Write one action to which you will commit as a response to this passage (e.g. “I will give you my full attention when you speak,” “I will honor the sabbath this week by…”).

1. \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>1</sup> Lederach, John Paul. *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Gilmore and Patrick Fraleigh, *The Friendly Style Profile: A Guide through Calm and Storm*. ([www.friendlypress.com](http://www.friendlypress.com): Eugene, OR), 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Speed Leas, *Moving Your Church through Conflict*. (Alban Institute: Washington D.C.), 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Brene Brown, *Daring to Lead*. Ibid., pp. 258ff.

<sup>5</sup> Fisher, Roger and Ury, William. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. Rev. ed. New York: Penguin Books, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Blackburn, “Mediation Skills Training Institute.” Lombard-Mennonite Peace Center, Chicago, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> The authors’ sense of the correct answers for each scenario are as follows:

*Scenario 1: Leadership Expectations* – Negotiable: behaviors, schedules, job responsibilities. Discussed but not typically negotiated: values associated with “chit chat,” feelings, trust.

*Scenario 2: Property Committee Processes* – Negotiable: respecting boundaries, how decisions are made, procedures, job responsibilities. Discussed but not typically negotiated: management style.

*Scenario 3: Youth Director and Finance Director* – Negotiable: how people treat each other, communicating about problems, reimbursement, procedures, schedules. Discussed but not typically negotiated: prejudices, management style, attitudes, hurt feelings, trust, perception of right from wrong.

*Scenario 4: What to Preach* – Discussed but not typically negotiated: personal style, perception of right from wrong. Cannot be mediated: wide gap in power between the parties, and (possibly) abusive behavior.

*Scenario 5: Get Off My Lawn!* – Negotiable: communicating about problems, job responsibilities.

*Scenario 6: LGBTQ Opinions* – Negotiable: how people treat each other, how decisions are made, rules and regulations. Discussed but not typically negotiated: principles and values, prejudices, hurt feelings, trust, fault, perception of right from wrong. Cannot be mediated: wide gap in power between parties, and abusive behavior (Elder U and Elder V).

<sup>9</sup> The next major section is “Mediation Scenarios: Roleplays” and describes scenarios a group can roleplay as a training exercise for mediation in small and mid-sized groups, neutralizing history, and for mediation in large groups. These various methods for engaging conflict are described in the next three sub-sections.