

DEVELOPING YOUR SKILLS

Archdeacon Bob Barrett

Managing Conflict in the Church

The second of 2 books on relationships in the Church.

**We equip ourselves to manage conflict in a Christian
manner - before conflict emerges.**

**Leaders set the example of the way this is done.
Booklet 13 on “Handling Hurts” is essential preliminary
reading**

DEVELOPING YOUR SKILLS Number 14

Archdeacon Bob Barrett

Managing Conflict in the Church

Leaders may be called to manage conflict in the Church.

The second of 2 booklets on relationships in the Church.

Booklet 13 on “Handling Hurts” is essential preliminary reading

We equip ourselves before conflict emerge so we can handle it in a Christian manner.

This series of Booklets provide practical ideas to help leaders develop their skills in a variety of ministry areas. Experimenting with them, growing your own ideas, discussion with ministry teams will help both you and others grow in skill. Good modelling, evaluation and training will inspire worshippers to worship, pray and grow in their Christian life and ministry.

© copyright Bob Barrett

109 Arapiki Rd, Stoke, Nelson 7011, New Zealand

Phone + 64 3 54 777 54

PERMISSION TO RECEIVE AND PRINT COPIES of these booklet

There are 15 titles in the series – see the last page for a title list.

Electronic copies can be obtained from Bob who will email you copies of the titles you request. Bob Barrett, 109 Arapiki Rd, Stoke, Nelson 7011. bobmargaret@xtra.co.nz.

These are provided free to those who have purchased a copy of

“The Church Beyond ... OUR LEADERSHIP” (see below).

You are welcome to copy and use the booklets in this series in whatever way is helpful for the development of your local community of faith.

In making copies please acknowledge authorship and please do not change or edit the text.

New Book by Bob:

“The Church Beyond OUR LEADERSHIP” 254 pages

The book’s content, layout, stories, examples and questions are designed to provide inspiration, encouragement and equipping for clergy, lay leaders (and emerging leaders) of the local Church in New Zealand and Australia. It covers the
21 Characteristics of a Leader in the Local Church and
21 Principles for Managing the Local Church.

ORDERING “The Church Beyond ... OUR LEADERSHIP”

From: Bob Barrett

Post: 109 Arapiki Rd, Stoke, Nelson, New Zealand 7011.

Email: bobmargaret@xtra.co.nz

Cost – as we are on the second printing the cost is **now \$20**

(Talk to Bob about further discounts for multiple copies).

Postage within New Zealand is **\$5** for single copies and less per copy for multiple copies.

Bob will send an account which can be paid by cheque or internet banking.

Alternatively copies can be ordered via Fishpond or direct from the publisher:

The Copy Press at \$30 + Postage and Packaging

Phone: 03 547 2972

Fax: 03 547 2973

Web: www.copypress.co.nz

Email: info@copypress.co.nz

Relationships in the church are **vitaly important**. As the church we are a group of Christians – together, accepting, relating, caring, supporting, helping, belonging – a community of love.

Sadly **hurts, disagreements and conflicts** sometimes occur. We need to know how to handle such things.

Two booklets' in the Developing Your Skills series, Number 13: 'Handling Hurts in the Church' and Number 14: 'Managing Conflict in the Church', are on **relationships and conflict**. Number 16 picks up the related theme: 'Criticism – How do we respond?'

As Christians we can **learn to handle hurts, criticism and conflict** in a positive manner. I hope reading and reflecting on the issues these booklets raise will help us all better deal with criticism, hurts and "manage conflict". Discussing the issues in small groups could help us grapple with some of the more complex issues.

Growth in this area is important for all Christians – and vital for church leaders - both lay and ordained.

My **thanks** to the Diocese of Nelson for Sabbatical Study Leave and assistance; and to the St John's College Trust Board for scholarships which enabled my wife and I to undertake Sabbatical Study Leave with a focus on "Conflict Management in the Church". One result of that study was a two day training seminar we developed on Managing Conflict in the Church – which we have run on a number of occasions. The course we developed taught participants mediation skills so they could assist others in working through conflict. Booklets 13 and 14 were required preliminary reading for that course.

CONTENTS

Conflict? In Our Church? Yes!

Terms and Meanings

Some Goals To Work Towards

What Style Do You Prefer?

Behavioural Ground Rules

Ten Steps For Managing Conflict

Levels Of Conflict

Adapting The Steps To The Levels And Situations

So What Next?

Appendix: Useful Resources

***This booklet, No 14, is the **second of two** on the topic of
“Relationships and Conflict in the Church”.***

*To understand the background to the content of this booklet
it will be vital to also study*

Booklet No 13: “Handling Hurts in the Church”.

CONFLICT? IN OUR CHURCH? YES!

Conflict is likely to emerge in **every church**. Hopefully it will not be serious conflict. If handled well it can bring positive results of increased maturity, new perceptions, greater awareness of God’s will and renewed energy to “go forth together”.

Leaders and mature Christians are often called upon to “manage conflict”. How we do so is **influenced** by a number of things:

- our personalities;
- past experiences;
- level of involvement in this conflict;
- skills gained; conflict management style preferences;
- relationships with the conflicting parties;
- the “level” the conflict has reached (how serious it is);
- how well the parties know and trust (or fear) each other;
- the skills and maturity of the parties;
- the number of people directly involved or affected by the “fight” and its possible outcomes;
- and other factors that may be unique to our situation.

The variety and number of these factors frequently make conflict management complex.

- therefore the issues and steps suggested in this booklet should not be seen as either unnecessary nor as a guarantee to “fix it” process.
- they are aspects of conflict management to consider. They need to be adapted and applied as appropriate for each situation.

In preparation for these issues **read** (maybe read again) booklet 13: “Handling Hurts” especially sections:

- There is conflict in the church!
- Why does conflict exist in the church?
- It is helpful to understand ...
- Leaders – you are involved!

From these sections in booklet 13 always **keep in mind**:

- reconciliation cannot be forced
 - the impact of environment on causing or increasing the level of the conflict
 - the impact of fear and therefore our responsibilities to do things that will decrease fear
 - the vital importance for leaders to recognise conflict, take responsible initiative, create positive climate, set a good example by the way we respond to conflict, and
 - not be afraid to seek help.
-

TERMS AND MEANINGS

Authors use their own variety of definitions.

I have tried to keep to basic easily understood words. Generally words will, I hope, be clear in the text. Some words to think about now are:

Conflict

This is a power struggle between two parties (individuals or groups) over actual or perceived differences and involving events, ideas and/or decisions. It is a fire whose heat can destroy or refine. We can learn to use the heat for positive not destructive results.

Win/win

This is seeking a solution where all parties win – in a way that the church and God's work in the world also wins. Where win/win is not possible "managers" seek both an outcome and a process where the costs of a **win/lose** solution are minimised; togetherness in the body continues; and God's work is not jeopardised. Win/win often means a "**mostly win + a little loss**" for both sides.

Cheap Peace

This is peace that ignores what is happening in people (their struggles and hurts) and fails to acknowledge that people are different. It can drive out one party or push conflict below the surface.

Management of Conflict

This is regarded by many as a better term than "Conflict resolution" because we cannot guarantee to resolve conflict; we cannot force parties to be reconciled. We manage rather than control conflict situations.

Management requires intentional intervention. A manager works "with" the parties not "for" the parties – helping them to help themselves to reach the solution they agree on.

Interest and Positions

- **Interests** are the underlying **needs** or concerns – the things that people really want – the underlying problem to be addressed.
- **position** is the stand they take – the solution they currently see to reach their need or interest.

People can be in conflict over “positions” – yet when they understand each other’s underlying “interests” and focus on the others needs it can be easier to find an alternative solution which is agreeable to all parties.

- **example one:**

position – *“I want the window open”*

interest – *“I need fresh air”*

alternative solutions – *“turn on the fan, open the door”*.

- **example two:**

position – *“the music group leader should be sacked because they cannot relate to the group”*

interest – *“good relationships in the music group”*

alternative solution – *“teach the leader relationship skills”*.

Some books distinguish between **negotiation and mediation**. Negotiation is where the conflicting parties “negotiate” a solution between themselves. Mediation brings in (an) outside person(s) to assist the parties find a solution.

Dialogue and Debate

Dialogue is where a conversation takes place between parties - allowing a free flow of ideas, accepting and wanting to hear and understand the others perspective, views and needs - in to which the Holy Spirit can speak.

Debate means looking for the weakness of another’s ideas and tries to convince that ‘I am right’.

Arbitration

This uses people outside the conflict to hear the “complaints”, sift facts and make a (binding or non-binding) decision. It should be well down on the list of methods to solve conflict. If conflict is serious some sides may not accept the arbitrator’s decision. There can, however, be a prior agreement to follow the arbitrator’s recommendation.

Triangling – setting up a triangle.

This is where one person or group take the problem to a third party rather than talk directly to the person or group who are the other party in the conflict. Successful conflict management (eventually) encourages conflicting parties to talk together.

SOME GOALS TO WORK TOWARDS

WHAT END RESULT ARE WE AIMING FOR when we try to manage the conflict around us?

Reconciliation between parties should be the primary aim. Sadly full reconciliation is not always immediately possible. Only God can bring true reconciliation. We can play our part in helping each other be open.

Where possible we aim for a **win/win** solution. Where this is not attainable we aim to minimise the cost of a win/lose outcome – both by the **solution** reached AND the **process** (the way we go about obtaining that solution).

THERE ARE OTHER GOALS AS WELL

We try to help people **cope with the cost** involved of conflict. This includes the cost of coping with diversity; accepting diversity; working through the pain of exploring differences; struggling through disagreements. There is also the cost of not walking away from experiences which frighten or confuse participants and onlookers.

Another goal is to **help people stay together** in continuing to follow God's leading in the purposes and ministries the Lord has for our church. We do not let the devil win by driving a wedge between Christians.

God's peace can pervade our life together – even in conflict. Certainly **peaceful togetherness** should be an end result of the way Christians handle conflict. The peace God brings as we learn how "together to look to God".

We try to create an **environment for personal growth** and community growth. Growth can come through the experiences of being in and working through conflict.

We aim to see people **live together in harmony** so the **church is stronger** rather than weaker - so that the church be an attractive community attracting others.

We aim to build skills in Christians so they are better **able to work through future** (even bigger) **conflict** and not repeat the same mistakes in the future. Conflict is an **opportunity to learn** and use new skills.

Maybe (depending on our experience) we will find a **better way of being church** than we have so far experienced or can imagine. To do this we will need to handle conflict in a way that avoids permanent scars for any individual and for the church as whole.

Other spin-offs include:

- new visions - to help the church keep focussed on the Lord or refocus on the Lord's future hopes and designs.
- working through one conflict may also provide solutions to conflicts we did not realise were lying under the surface.

For discussion:

How do you respond to these goals?

What other goals would you add to these?

WHAT STYLE DO YOU PREFER?

THERE ARE VARIOUS WAYS OF DEALING WITH CONFLICT

- Each person has their own more natural (preferred) “style”.
- No one style is right or wrong.
- Each style has occasions of usefulness or non-usefulness.
- It is helpful if we understand our more natural approach and know when it is appropriate to use.
- We also should understand other approaches so that we are ready to use them when the occasion requires such methods.

MANY RESOURCES AND BOOKS include explanations and questionnaires to help us understand the various styles.

- Speed Leas in “Discover Your Conflict Management Style” provides a questionnaire and explanation of six styles.
- David Cormack in “Peacing Together” gives a more complex and useful grid to alert us to our strengths and weaknesses – see Chapter 4.

STYLES OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT INCLUDE:

Persuasion

Here attempts are made to change another’s views. “I am right; you need to change your thinking”. Here it is important to focus on the problems and issues – not talking down the person. Good persuaders listen carefully and present both sides.

Persuasion can be appropriate when the persuader is trusted and respected – especially if those “being persuaded” have similar underlying values and goals. It is unlikely to bring harmony in high levels of conflict or low levels of trust.

Compelling or Forcing

This requires authority to be given and force used. Compelling is used in society (e.g. the laws, police). Some advice (from such people as doctors and authority figures – including bishops) is felt, by some, to be compelling.

Collaboration

This is regarded by many as the best (or, wrongly, the only) method. It means to co-labour or work together.

It means reaching a mutually agreed definition of the problem and an acceptable solution.

Collaboration works best when parties have the motivation to invest time and energy exploring issues and possible solutions – to seek consensus with respect for each other’s ideas.

It is unlikely to work when tensions, fears and distrust are all high.

The aim is to try for a win/win solution and therefore is more likely to be successful at lower levels of conflict.

Negotiation or Bargaining.

This recognises there are likely to be some losses - so people aim for more than they hope to achieve (as in wage negotiations), knowing they will not achieve everything.

Its success depends on people's willingness to back off some of their demands.

In managing negotiation begin with areas where agreement is more likely and gradually move to the more difficult.

It can be used at all levels of conflict – unless parties strongly hold differing values.

It is risky where parties come from greatly differing power positions or have great fear.

Compromise

When a mutually satisfactory solution cannot be reached some compromise(s) will be needed - especially when time is limited or a compromise is OK in this issue.

Sadly each compromise reduces the quality of the decision and the commitment to it because it is likely that one side will lose more than the other.

Negotiation is a form of reaching agreed compromises.

Support

This is usually a style used by people who are outside the problem and, usually, are not responsible for "fixing it". It can be difficult when those you are supporting want you to take sides or do something to "sort out" the other party.

People struggling to cope need to be able to express feelings (anger etc); release emotions; and talk through what is happening with the support person. It may be possible to help them gain a fuller perspective of the complex issues.

Accommodation

This is the term for "going along" with the wishes of the other party – "giving in" to them. People for whom relationships are more important than issues use this approach – as do those who are powerless (unskilled in a lower level position, non-assertive, or lacking the energy required). Also when the issue is less important – "choose your battles".

Avoiding, ignoring and fleeing

These are approaches some prefer – but techniques leaders should seldom resort to.

These may be appropriate methods as a temporary measure (although watch the cost of delay); or when parties are fragile; issues are irrelevant and/or insignificant (in the eyes of the parties); the situation will take care of itself; or the parties are satisfactorily dealing with it themselves.

Note: Accommodation, avoidance, ignoring and fleeing do not change situations so may leave conflicts to simmer in preparation for later eruption. They also may imply "you don't care about me".

BEHAVIOURAL GROUND RULES

THE REALITY OF RULES.

Rules are **agreed ways to deal with differences** – the behaviour that each party will use as they explore ways forward.

Churches have rules – written and unwritten. Often unexplained rules act as “norms” determining the way people behave. These can (positively and negatively) affect the way Christians approach conflict. They can be helpful or unhelpful.

- Unwritten, unhelpful “rules” may need to be changed.

Official “church government” rules are important to use – especially in serious levels of conflict.

Unwritten rules (or “norms” of behaviour) need to be discovered and articulated – especially where they do not help conflict management. These unwritten rules may include:

- we are nice but not honest
- we don't challenge the system
- we wear certain clothes
- we don't allow anger
- we accept the vicar is always right
- we accept that our ideas are always *right*
- we don't challenge people who hurt or upset us – we only complain to others
- we don't tell leaders if we disagree with their decisions (behaviour, attitudes, actions) – we just withhold our money
- we are not supposed to have conflict – so we ignore it.

SOME RULES NEED TO BE SET IN PLACE FOR *THIS* CONFLICT

Rules for **agreed behaviour** in “this conflict” should be developed, where possible, by all parties involved – at the very least all parties must agree to these ground rules.

If numbers are large a few representatives of each action can gather to decide on rules (and what will happen if people fail to abide by them).

Some rules could cover behaviours to avoid.

These ground rules could include a few, but not all of:

- no name calling or labelling
- no mind reading or motive challenging (“*you think*”)
- no guilt making (“*you've made me feel*”)
- no personal attack – to take down another
- no threatening
- no blaming (of others or self)
- no generalisations – “*people are saying*”, “*everybody*”
- no interrupting.

Some rules could cover acceptable behaviour to use.

These could include a few, but not all of:

- use “I” statements (I, my, our)
- speak for yourself, not for others
- it is OK for you to have feelings - and for other people to have their feelings (e.g. hurt, anger, fear).
- it is OK not to understand something – seek clarification
- it is OK to change your mind
- it is OK to disagree with behaviour, actions and ideas – as long as you hear and understand the other’s point of view
- clearly express the problem as you see it
- be real, honest, specific and clear in stating concerns. Give facts and names.
- describe what you know (not guess)
- listen to understand – and be able to paraphrase another’s statements
- exercise self control and patience
- when you disagree with a course of action be willing to suggest an alternative
- propose changes and ways forward
- admit your own mistakes
- take responsibility for your feelings
- hang in until the end of the process.

It may be helpful to list decided behavioural rules in a place where they are visible to all parties in discussion.

Remember: parties in conflict should develop their rules for the situation. Normally they should not be imposed although some could be suggested as possibilities.

Peace through conflict is both

“God’s gift and our response-ability”

Halverstadt, page 198

TEN STEPS FOR MANAGING CONFLICT

A BASIC APPROACH

Below is a **simple approach** to use when mediating or managing conflict.

- However, this approach needs to be adjusted for different types of conflict
- and may need to be **supplemented** with other steps especially if situations are more complex.

The steps aim to be **fair and open**. Whether they are depends on the willingness of the parties and the skill of those managing the process.

Dealing with conflict is **seldom easy** and involves **risk** – especially at the more serious levels of conflict – but the risks of *non-management* are nearly always greater.

When **choosing a specific approach** to a particular conflict we need to keep in mind the issues spelt out in “the steps”, and such things as:

- how well people know each other
- the quality of their relationships
- the skill the parties have for listening and working at issues
- the number of people affected and concerned
- the experience and skill of those who will manage the conflict
- the seriousness of the conflict
- the length of time it has been around
- the time available
- whether we are parties in the conflict; concerned (or affected) bystanders; or just “detached” managers.

Sometimes we are called to be “managers” even though **we** are also **one of the conflicting parties** – this is often true for clergy.

- We must then be extremely careful to be “fair”.
- Also we are **not** then in a position to support or guide one of the other parties.

Managers are **not sorting it out for parties rather *working with*** the parties as they seek for their solution.

At any (or all) stages in the process **parties** may need to be **supported** or guided. They may need opportunities to talk or to learn new ideas or skills. The conflict manager may need to provide (or organise) this assistance of a listening ear or a teacher of new ways.

Conflict managers do not need to know all the skills nor have all the wisdom required – rather to have the ability to draw out skills, perceptions, ideas, possible solutions, motivation and implementation strategies from the whole church – including the conflicting parties.

Managers need to create a positive sense of hope which encourages participation and honest sharing of issues - both interests and feelings.

Step One: Conflict arises

Conflict may simmer below the surface before bursting forth. The sooner it is acknowledged the better.

When discovered or expressed it normally should be **taken to the leaders** of the particular ministry area in which the problem exists. Problems should not (at least initially) be taken to the whole church or to other leaders – although the vicar (and perhaps senior lay leaders) may need to be alerted. Here keep in mind the issues outlined in Booklet 13's exploration of Matthew 18: 15-20.

The appropriate leadership then faces the **question**: should this problem be dealt with (or should it be left alone)?

- Some problems do not need to be tackled
- However, our natural tendency is to avoid conflict that should be dealt with and could lead to greater trouble.
- The risk of ignoring or suppressing conflict is usually greater than the cost of working it through.

Once conflict has surfaced the process of managing it needs to begin immediately – usually getting the parties together as soon as possible.

- The longer a situation is left the more it is likely to become serious conflict with distorted thinking, personal attack and difficult to heal hurts.

Those seeking to manage the conflict will again need to check whether they have the time, skills and resources to handle what is emerging – or do others need to be asked to help.

Step Two: Encourage the parties to participate

- In serious conflicts getting them together may not be easy.

WORKING TOGETHER

It is much better if parties **talk together** in their conflict. They need, where possible, to directly hear what each other is saying.

Others managing the conflict, or anyone else should avoid “solving” the problem “for” them.

Others, not affected by the conflict do not unnecessarily need to be involved in its solution – unless things escalate to involve wider groups.

WHO ARE THE PARTIES

Sometimes it is not easy to determine who the affected groups are, but there are usually three groups:

- those involved as “parties” to the conflict
- those who (know they) are directly affected by the conflict,
- and those who care about its outcome.

Work first with those directly involved. They should have a real opportunity to seek to solve it before it is “taken” to others.

Those not directly affected should not have to deal with the issues.

It is easier to “repair” relationships and to apologise for hasty words and actions when fewer people are involved.

SOHOW MANY PEOPLE

The larger the conflicting groups the more difficult it will be to understand and solve the conflict.

Many conflicts only need to be worked through with a smaller sub-group – or different ways found to involve people – e.g. using representatives; or working with most directly affected while keeping those less directly involved informed.

In larger churches where conflict involves many people it is often not appropriate (nor possible) to bring together all who are concerned. Representatives may need to be used.

- If necessary special techniques would need to be developed for involving the whole church in working through conflict.

In larger churches (300-400 at worship) conflict often only involves smaller sub-groups.

ARE THE PARTIES WILLING

If either party **refuses to meet** (or does not acknowledge there is a problem) it may not be possible to do anything – unless it is a serious issue where church leadership “must” make and impose a decision (which is likely to be ignored or fought by a dissatisfied party).

- the ‘refusing party’ may be encouraged to attend by first telling their story to the manager - but do not enter into dialogue about what the other party has said.

BEFORE GETTING TOGETHER

There are times when parties should **temporarily be kept apart**. Perhaps because:

- parties are not ready to meet, or feel vulnerable
- tension is high or people are too hurt - needing time and help to work through their hurts
- parties are not in a position to listen, or to work through issues in a positive manner
- more understanding is required
- some preparation work is needed with one or more groups
- more teaching / skills need to be given to one or more groups.

Prior preparation, before parties can meet could involve:

- setting ground rules of behaviour
- clarifying areas to be covered
- creating an acceptable agenda for the first meeting(s)
- clarifying who will be involved
- possibly explaining the others needs, hurts and hopes – although this may be better held to the meeting where these things will need to be shared.

People may be nervous so seek to **reduce fear**

- people fear rejection, failure and meeting those they are in conflict with.
- people's expectations about what might occur are usually worse than what is likely (and does) happen.

Invest time **helping people participate**. When trust increases and fear reduces people are more likely to meet.

Sometimes hurting people will need to be brought together in **small steps**.

WHILE WORKING TOGETHER

In the initial stages building rapport is more important than clarifying all the facts.

Keep **building trust** by:

- helping people to get to know the others as persons
- allowing people to share their needs, desires, hopes, fears, feelings, ideas. Help people own their feelings.
- meeting in neutral, non-threatening, comfortable surroundings
- increasing communication
- recalling past achievements together
- acknowledging common goals and values
- recognising areas of agreement.

Encourage people to be committed to **staying with the process**

- people who are fearful and hurt may need to be reminded of meetings and constantly encouraged to participate.

“encouraging the others to join with you in dealing with conflict and encouraging the others to stay with you in the process is perhaps the single most important conflict management skill one can use”

Speed Leas, “Leadership in Conflict” page 65

Good processes try to help Christians find ways to
“speak the truth in love”. Ephesians 4:16

Step Three: Decide processes to be used

- steps 3 and 4 are equally important
- at times the order of Steps 3 and 4 may need to be reversed

When **parties share** in developing a process to handle the conflict they are more likely to abide by the ground rules, agree with the outcome and follow through on the decisions.

One aspect of process is agreeing together on “**ground rules**”.

- When people feel threatened (or powerless) they are more likely to be reactionary
- Rules for acceptable behaviour increase power by enhancing people’s sense of control and this reduces fear.
- These may need to be put in place before parties can even get together.

Agreeing on a structure for working towards a solution helps people know they are safe and in a fair, helpful environment where their concerns will be listened to.

Try to plan a **process for collaborative problem solving** where parties mutually define the problem, gather information, seek alternative solutions and choose one.

Unfortunately not all conflicting parties can find collaborative conclusions – especially those where parties have totally opposite desires. For example “he should be sacked” versus “he should be kept on”. While planning to be collaborative be ready to use other methods.

The process may major on one or both of:

- working at all the **issues of difference** between the parties, and/or
- working at the **relationships** between the parties

Perhaps one will need to happen first. Perhaps in ‘this situation’ one is not so important – although conflict over issues can soon affect relationships. In the end relationships are vital and if “broken” need, if at all possible, to be restored – by rebuilding trust, communication and respect.

Step Four: Define the problem(s) - the issues

It is important to define the problem as people may perhaps, wrongly, assume the nature of the problem(s) and **jump to conclusions** about “the other side”. Watch for distorted perceptions.

Allow people to share their stories - this raises issues and helps clarify the problem(s). Managers and each party must **take seriously** the stories, perceptions and concerns people share.

Here, or in Step 5, **look for interests** (underlying needs or concerns) not just positions (the stance parties take – the solution they currently want). List the interests.

Any side may need help in **expressing their concerns**. The clear expression will help all sides have lower anxiety levels. People will know what they are dealing with and realise the “other side” is beginning to understand them.

It may be necessary to help parties **think “theologically”** about how Christian belief impinges on the issues (this step) and the processes (step 3) of this conflict.

Try to have the problem stated in a way that makes a **solution more possible** – expressing it so that alternative potential solutions can be brain stormed and investigated. Not ‘the music group leader is inadequate’, rather “the music group leader has difficulty relating to group members”.

Try to define the problem with an **emphasis on the opportunities** and positive aspects that could emerge – e.g. “*what help could be given so the music group leader can improve his relating skills*”.

In defining the problem it may be appropriate to avoid a long list of sub-problems. Perhaps require parties to bring no more than three main aspects and events.

Separate the issues so one does not cloud another

Work towards an **agreed definition** of the problem. *You will never agree on a solution until you agree on a problem.* Look for common goals, dreams and values.

Step Five: Exploring the Information to increase understanding and widen options

TAKE TIME TO CLARIFY AND ANALYSE

Take time. Don’t rush. Avoid short cuts. Information that is inadequate, incomplete, unfair, one-sided, loaded with feelings, or not thought through properly will not help.

GATHERING THE INFORMATION

Normally all sides and others that are affected should be involved in this, if possible sitting together and sharing their stories, perceptions and understandings of the situation.

- watch for different perceptions of the facts
- after issues are clarified encourage the sharing of ‘interests’.

At times, especially in complex conflict - other neutral, skilled people/managers, who are not emotionally involved in the conflict, may need to gather information by talking separately to the parties and others. People may not give complete information to non-neutral enquirer’s. However take care – some things should be (must be?) done with the parties together.

Telephone conversation and **questionnaires** may give helpful information in lower level conflict but where tensions are high face to face interviews by people who are known and trusted are more likely to be effective.

Be clear about any additional information required:

- what data is required and how will it be gathered
- how it will be gathered
- who will gather it from whom
- with whom it will be shared.

The **information required** includes:

- who cares about the issues and who is affected
- who needs to be invited to share perceptions and concerns
- what are the **sources** of conflict - there is likely to be more than one issue, one person or one ingredient.
- what concerns do those involved have? Be aware of people's behaviour, attitudes, fears, responses, hurts, concerns, ideas, disappointments, hopes, dreams, values, information, misunderstandings.
- look for guidelines; church rules and policy; past experiences etc; that could impinge on the conflict and its solution.

WHO SHOULD KNOW?

In dealing with conflict situations **confidentiality** is **not** usually helpful if it means confidentiality allowing people to pass on information but not having to own that information and 'front up' about it. People sharing information need to know that it (and who it came from) will be discussed with the parties involved (and when appropriate vestry and/or staff and/or the bishop) otherwise:

- issues being raised cannot be "worked on"
- those criticised cannot understand, answer, correct the information or adjust their behaviour - they must know their accusers and the accusations.
- Some people making accusations can tend to exaggerate or over interpret
- parties to the conflict get upset about what might be being said – but they are not sure because they 'cannot be told'
- those who gather the information can do nothing with it - a solution cannot be worked towards
- fear/anxiety increases and barriers rise. Accurate information ultimately reduces fear.

Note:

- this is quite different from 'breaking confidences' - where people believe what is shared is done so 'in confidence' - e.g. when talking with clergy
- it is inappropriate to use confidential information or to imply such information exists.

ANALYSING THE INFORMATION

It is one thing to clearly state the problem and gather information about it but it is far more difficult to discuss it with the "opposition".

- For many it is threatening to analyse information and explore possible solutions.

Here **the aim is to understand** the underlying issues and interests – so the focus needs to be:

- on real issues or actual behaviour not on persons
- describing the problem (the difference between what is and what is wanted).
- on specifics - *generalisation cannot be negotiated*.
- on actual specifics, not guesswork
- look for what can be changed now.

Encourage people to **carefully listen** to each other.

- encourage people to use words that do not offend so real issues are heard
- be alert to half truths and misinterpreted information
- allow feelings to be expressed
- get people to restate and paraphrase what has been said to them and the feelings behind it.

By this stage a **number of issues** may have surfaced. Try to separate them out and deal with one issue at a time.

Continue to **look for the underlying interests and desires** - not just the presented “surface” issues and positions.

Step Six: Brainstorm potential alternative solutions

This step should include the conflicting parties and maybe others.

Encourage each party to describe its wants and share possible solutions.

- What is it these parties are really wanting?
- Is there a way to “get” that - a way nobody has yet thought of – a way that will be less upsetting for the other party?
- Encourage people to express statements with phrases such as *“My concerns would be taken care of if”*

Encourage creativity and the brain storming of many possible alternative ways forward - **before** discussing the merits of each.

- List all possible solutions on a white board (or better on large sheets of paper) – so they are visible to all, can easily be referred to and (if on paper) can be kept until the process is complete.

Encourage parties to share their reactions to the alternatives suggested – after as many alternatives as possible have been ‘dreamed up’ and written up. Ensure that what might be impossible suggestions are listed as they might lead to workable even better ideas.

Take time – this time and stage 7 may take hours or in some types of conflict could take weeks or months.

Be alert to things parties can agree on – acknowledge and list these – include common values, goals, actions, interests, and areas of mutual gain.

Step Seven: Together choose (an) agreed solution(s)

This is an **important** and probably **difficult** step. Making a decision, for some, may be difficult – as they then must take responsibility for that solution.

It may advantageous to take time to agree on **criteria** for choosing an option.

In discussions seek for a **dialogue** approach (talking through the issues) rather than a **debate** (arguing for or against) approach.

Encourage the use of techniques for **good listening** - e.g. not interrupting while another is speaking, paraphrasing what the other has just shared.

When **evaluating alternatives** look for the benefits and the costs of each; look at the positives each idea could produce and not just the negative aspects. There may be more good in an idea than initially appears present. Best ways forward may be a combination of ideas.

One way to seek a solution may be (for definition of these terms see above):

- first - attempt collaboration, or this fails
- second – try negotiation, or this fails
- third – use voting, or this fails
- fourth – use a church authority (local or denominational depending on the issue)

Note: an alternative to the third or fourth approaches is to use arbitration where an arbitrator provides either suggested solutions or binding outcomes.

The most likely to succeed solution will be the one reached **collaboratively** - where all those involved agree. Parties then are more likely to “buy into” its implementation.

The more we move beyond collaboration or negotiation the greater the likelihood of parties walking away from the process, or the outcome, or the church.

Those managing the conflict need to ensure that the effect of implementing a solution will be a positive outcome for the parties involved and for the whole church both now and in the future.

Step Eight: Communicate the Outcomes

All people involved and concerned will need to be informed of **decisions reached and actions to be taken**.

- Report on the things that are publicly known – not details that have all along been confidential to the parties (this will specially be the case in one to one or very small conflict).
- Records do not need to be kept of all the discussion – only the outcomes and agreed solutions.

It may be necessary to **inform** all (or a section) of the church.

- Information needs to be given – but not usually during the Sunday service.
- Services are celebrations of our life in God. Find other ways (letters, meetings etc) to keep the church updated.

Depending on the issue of conflict it may be necessary to help people grasp a **new vision** so all begin to sense a positive future.

At a later date it may also be appropriate to **communicate the lessons** that have been learned from the experience – including ways of dealing with (the inevitable?) future conflicts that could arise in a church following Jesus.

Step Nine: Provide ongoing support

The process continues by offering whatever **assistance** is required to people who were in some way affected – to people from all parties, concerned people and also to people in the church who were aware of “something going on”.

People (especially those in the conflicting parties) will **need time** to adjust to the decisions, change their behaviour, overcome hurts and implement the outcomes that apply to them.

People **may need help** with this. It can be appropriate to provide training, supervision, support, encouragement, counselling, prayer, friendship or

Step 10: Monitor and make adjustments

We need to ensure things are continuing to **develop and improve** – watching for unexpected struggles and for aspects of the solution which may not be working out as expected. Further assistance may be required.

Sometimes this will involve helping people **abide by the decisions** – reminding where aspects are forgotten or pointing out where certain behaviour is now inappropriate.

LEVELS OF CONFLICT

Not all conflicts are the same.

Some are more intense; some seem like minor disagreements; others appear impossible to solve. Different levels require us to adjust our basic approach to managing conflict.

- Speed Leas sets this out in a helpful way. For a fuller coverage of these issues see “Moving Your Church Through Conflict” chapter 3.

Questions those who manage conflict must ask include: How serious is this conflict? Which methods will we use/not use? How strongly do we need to act? The answers depend on the seriousness of the conflict – which level it is at.

Also – not everyone will be at the same level – although they are somehow involved in the same conflict. Some will feel the conflict more intensely than others. So who and how many are at what level?

Strategies are also different for larger groups.

Speed Leas gives 5 levels of conflict – each is conflict – i.e. not just misunderstanding or failed communication.

Level I: problem to solve – often healthy and stimulating.

Here people understand each other but have conflict over goals, values, needs, plans. Therefore they:

- feel uncomfortable in the opposition's presence
- may have short term anger
- still function rationally
- are problem orientated (not person orientated)
- are optimistic
- look for collaborative methods
- share information fully – are open with the other(s)
- keep to specific issues (and not generalise)
- want to solve the problem.

Level II: Disagreement. Still healthy but more scary.

People now find they:

- have disagreements that are more difficult
- become concerned with self protection
 - *"I don't want to get hurt"*
 - *"I want to come out looking good"*
- use shrewdness and calculation – not sharing all data
- begin discussing the problem with others – seeking advice and supporters – i.e. they are triangling
- develop strategies
- use more general language and are less specific
- talk of "some people" and stop using names
- lose trust
- are very cautious (not yet hostile) and therefore may hold back from relating
- look for compromise
- can use barbed, distancing, hostile jibes
- attack inaccuracies in the others case to score points not problem solve.

Level III: Contest – the conflict is now felt more intensely.

So people tend to:

- look to win (not just protect self)
- have more than one problem to "fix"
- develop factions

- they do not talk easily with the other party
- they resist making peace or working out a solution
- they resort to personal attacks
- they rely more on emotions than reason
- use distorted language and thinking - for example:
 - exaggeration_– see others as more evil than they are and oneself as more benevolent
 - dichotomization – divide issues and people into neat boxes
 - over generalisation – being vague and avoid the specific events or person(s). Use “*everybody*”, “*you always*”
 - assumption – as “mind readers” they assume the other’s motives “*you are trying to*” and assume they know the others responses and feelings.
 - inconsistency - in reason and responses
 - selective use of information – ignoring other facts
 - unrealistic_expectations – e.g. of the speed of change
 - blaming – wrongly blaming self or others
- they expect the others to take the initiative.

Level IV: Fight/flight

Speed Leas gives this title as our primitive survival responses take control.

People now:

- want to be right and to punish
- don’t think the other can change, therefore
- want to hurt and/or get rid of the other, or leave themselves (and take others with them)
- focus on their will or the good of a sub-group, not the whole organisation
- speak of rights, ideologies and principles
- cut themselves from the other parties “in an unforgiving, cold, self righteous” way.
- want to defeat the other rather than solve the problem
- enlist outsiders in their “cause”
- distort truth and make threats.

Level V: Intractable situations

By this Speed Leas means “unmanageable”

- People now want to destroy the other - not just get rid of them
- The fight must continue because “one cannot choose to stop fighting”.

ADAPTING THE TEN STEPS TO THE LEVELS OF CONFLICT AND SPECIFIC SITUATIONS

The 10 steps suggested above are basic frameworks which we can **adapt for particular situations**.

Adaptation is necessary when conflict involves:

- Interpersonal disagreements/conflict between us and another person or two other people
- small minorities
- large groups
- larger churches
- more serious levels of conflict
- long term conflict

The following suggestions may assist you but be **aware** of those occasions for which **you need skills and assistance** beyond the scope of this booklet and beyond the experience of those in your church. Further reading may provide answers. Advice from experienced denominational staff or para-church groups and community expertise will often be required.

A careful, thoughtful approach to conflict management will make many changes to the basic process obvious. The **ideas** below may also help you adapt your approach:

Conflict involving small minorities

- Ensure the ideas of the minority are heard – especially if they feel powerless
- In **low level conflict** it can be good to ensure the minority is represented on parish decision making groups (e.g. vestry, ministry team) so their ideas are heard and they feel represented.
- In **high level conflict** this will (almost certainly) not be appropriate as such minorities (or individuals) have probably adopted the behaviour and attitudes mentioned above for Levels III and IV. Their angry black and white judgmental attitudes will not enable them to contribute positively.
- If minorities or individuals continue to “stir” (after complaints have been investigated and dealt with) they will need to be clearly told the outcome of the investigation and asked to abide by the decision.

High Level Conflict

- In higher levels there will be greater fear. Parties feel more vulnerable and therefore are less likely to share openly.
- The expression of *feelings* become more dangerous – in lower levels shared feelings may draw parties together, and higher levels destructively push them apart.
- Feelings should be discussed with others who are not central parties in the conflict.

- Training (e.g. in listening skills) becomes less appropriate as tensions rise. Anger, fear and hurt reduce reception of new ideas. Role plays can seem trite and intrude on “getting to the real issues”.
- Level V requires outside intervention of skilled conflict manager. Level IV may also require outside help – especially if the parties are unable to work towards agreement.
- The higher the level the more important it is to follow established church rules and regulations.

Where alternatives are mutually exclusive

- Positive outcomes are hard to achieve if parties want opposite and exclusive results (e.g. “*he must be fired*” and “*he must be kept*”).
- In these situations we are likely to be forced to use either voting, compelling (authority figure decisions) and/or arbitrating.
- Compelling is the use of authority to make a decision and (by virtue of inherent power) to force compliance.
- Occasionally one party may seek civil power to “compel” (in spite of passages such as 1 Corinthians 6:1-6). It can occur when that party feels unheard or slighted by the decision.
- Such issues and methods can result in the dissatisfied parties leaving the church. All parties may end up dissatisfied.

Sharing with others.

- Because step 2 requires people to accurately express their concerns it can be very helpful to encourage parties to explore their situation with others they trust.
- This can also help if numbers are large and therefore the conflict will be managed by representatives of each side. Discussing in like-minded groups will help parties select people to represent them.

Using small groups.

- These are organised small groups - meeting specifically for the purpose of working at this conflict - by gathering with the mediators to share insights - and meeting for an hour or so.
- These small group meetings with the “manager” can be very helpful - providing information and giving people an opportunity to share their concerns. They encourage people to take responsibility for their views; for what they share; and helps others present increase their understanding.
- People can choose which group they wish to go to by adding their names to spaces on a chart.
- In the group the conflict manager could use questionnaires to gather information; raise questions for discussion; and allow questions to be raised by participants.

Using independent intermediaries.

- Sometimes, especially when it is difficult for parties to meet together, an independent “go between” can be used. That person must be trusted by both sides.
- Their task is to gather information from each party and present the opposing views to help each party understand the other.
- The aim is to provide understanding; eventually bring people together; and then work towards a solution – not to gather complaints or take sides.

Using consultants with conflict management expertise.

- At times this will be necessary – especially: for high levels of tension; conflict where Church Leaders are one of the parties; and conflict that has not been successfully resolved. Consultants will (in most cases):
 - act impartially
 - often cost money
 - ask lots of questions
 - spend time with parish leaders and conflicting parties
 - establish ways of working through the issues
 - gather information from others (with questions and/or interview and/or small group meetings)
 - recommend ways to deal with the issues
 - try to get parties talking
 - make it clear who they will be reporting to
 - report in writing
 - seek to help a decision be reached (not make the decision – unless arbitration has been requested)
 - provide follow up support and monitoring.

Rehearsing.

- Where people find it difficult or fearful to meet with the other party “rehearsal” can be used – where, with support persons, they can practice (role play) what they want to say when they eventually do get together with the other party.

SO WHAT NEXT?

Much has been unsaid. Further **learning** will come from: using the resources listed below; discussing with fellow Christians and Church Leaders; attending training events; observing conflict situations; and watching conflict managers at work.

The best way to develop the required skills is to actually manage some conflict. To reduce the likelihood of mistakes; find ways to minimise the impact of the mistakes we will make; and to reflect on our experience is important to seek the assistance of a **supervisor** who will enable us to learn for the sake of future conflict management requirements.

Do not be afraid to play your part in managing conflict for positive Christian outcomes. As I wrote in Booklet 13:

Have hope.

*God is in the business of healing hurts
and bringing reconciliation between conflicting parties.*

He looks to create positive relationships in the church.

No situation is beyond hope.

Every person can have a fresh beginning.

Even the most difficult situations can find a way forward.

We can play our part.

God will certainly be at work.

*Let's together be positive about a great church
with wonderful relationships, and an exciting future!*

USEFUL RESOURCES

Augsburger, David. "Caring Enough to Confront" Regal Books

Business Desk Reference. "How to Manage Conflict"

Cormack, David. "Peacing Together – From Conflict To Reconciliation" Marc

Craig, Yvonne Joan. "Peacemaking for Churches" SPCK

De Bono, Edward. "Conflicts – a Better Way to Resolve Them" Penguin

De Bono, Edward. "Six Thinking Hats" Penguin

Eunson, Baden. "Dealing With Conflict" Wiley

Fisher, Roger and Ury, William. "Getting to Yes – Negotiating an Agreement Without Giving In" Arrow business books

Halverstadt, Hugh. "Managing Church Conflict" Westminster/John Knox Press

Hathaway, Brian. "Living Below With the Saints we Know" N-Joy

Huggett, Joyce. "Conflict" Eagle

Kliwer, Steve. "How to Live With Diversity in the Local Church" Alban

Leas, Speed. "Leadership and Conflict" Abingdon

Leas, Speed. "Discover Your Conflict Management Style" Alban

Leas, Speed. "Moving Your Church Through Conflict" Alban

Lederach, John Paul. "The Journey Towards Reconciliation" Herald Press

Weeks, Dudley. "The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution" Tarcher Putman

TITLES IN THE SERIES:

- Number 1 "Visitor Friendly Worship"
- Number 2 "Worship - Who is it for?" – 2001 edition.
- Number 3 "Leading Worship - The Prayers"
- Number 4 "People Helping Skills"
- Number 5 "Preaching and Teaching"
- Number 6 "Stewardship - The Financial Area"
- Number 8 "Healing - Prayer Ministry"
- Number 9 "Informal Worship - Designing and Leading"
- Number 10 "Incorporation - Helping Newcomers Into Membership"
- Number 11 "Change - Introduce New Things Successfully"
- Number 12 "Youth Ministry For the 21st Century"
- Number 13 "Handling Hurts in the Church"
- Number 14 "Managing Conflict in the Church"
- Number 15 "Every Member Ministry – Making It Work"
- Number 16 "Criticism – How Do We Respond?"

Please note that Number 7 on Planning is not available in the Electronic Series.
