

# **Assessing Conflict in the Congregational Setting**

Developed by Doug Luginbill, Central District Conference Minister  
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## **Purpose of this Resource**

This resource is intended to provide tools for assessing the nature of conflict in a congregational setting. It also provides some possible steps that congregational leadership can consider when assessing a conflict situation. Recognizing that each conflict is unique and shaped by various local factors, this resource serves as a “high level” tool to assist in recognizing and assessing conflict in general. Please note that any conflict which involves accusations of “ministerial sexual misconduct” must be communicated to the Central District Conference leadership immediately. <https://mcusacdc.org/misconduct/> Also, a resource for addressing sexual misconduct by a non-pastoral member of the congregation can be found here: <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/resource-portal/resource/prevention-and-response-sexual-abuse-and-non-credentialed-individuals/>

## **What is Conflict?**

Conflict is “a gap between what we want and what we are experiencing at any given moment.”  
-Nate Regier in *Conflict Without Casualties*

Conflict is natural. Conflict is neither good nor bad. Conflict provides opportunities for growth.

Sometimes disagreements or differences are mistaken for conflict. Disagreements can be healthy expressions of the diverse ways in which we see and experience the world. These morph into “conflict” when these disagreements become personal as selfhood is threatened and others are seen as the cause of the problem. An *us vs them* polarity can develop. Conflict can move further into “entrenchment” when different sides become cemented in place.

-Betty Pries, *The Space Between Us*, (22-24)

## **Common Responses to Conflict**

One’s personality type or temperament, family of origin, vocation, life experience, training, theology/philosophy, and culture all shape how a person responds to conflict. Additionally, one’s current life situation can dramatically affect how one responds to conflict. Someone who is experiencing multiple difficult situations, or a recent traumatic event will respond to conflict differently than if they were in a non-anxious life situation.

In the Mennonite Church, our theology of non-violence and peace can shape our response to conflict. Consider the following observation by Peter L. Steinke, “When premium value is placed on harmony, acceptance, and belonging, people resist information that might disturb their peace. No one wants to speak the truth. If people are emotionally linked, they may not have sufficient space to challenge one another.”

-Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, (26)

Steinke also identifies a common conflict response:

“The following conflict scenario is repeated regularly: friction between two parties intensifies; a series of painful exchanges follow; the sides deadlock; finally someone or some group requests or demands a person’s removal or they threaten to remove themselves. Any removal would bring relief to some but fuel resentment among others. Instead of being conciliatory or engaging in problem solving, people become polarized.”

-Peter Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, (105)

Observers of social behavior have long identified the following common responses to conflict or threats.

1. Fight- responding aggressively to a real or perceived threat (This can be with words, body posture, actions or passive aggressive behaviors.)
2. Flight- running away or retreating (This can be refusing to show up, leaving the church, choosing not to engage in dialogue or processes.)
3. Freeze- unable to move or act to the threat (This can include “zoning out,” pretending something never happened, or literally not remembering a traumatic event.)
4. Fawn- immediately attempting to appease or please the aggressor (This can include taking responsibility for some else’s bad behavior or mistake, minimizing a hurtful action, or making excuses for someone else’s bad behavior.)

Each of these responses can be the “right” response in any particular situation. However, most people have a preferred response that is used most frequently. The challenge comes when the preferred response is not a helpful or appropriate response. Developing the ability to respond in different ways to different situations can assist in moving through conflict.

## **Approaches to Conflict**

### *The Compassion Cycle*

Nate Regier describes the Compassion Cycle in *Conflict without Casualties*. There are four movements in the cycle beginning with a position of “openness.”

1. Open- “Openness is a state of non-judgmental receptivity to your own and others’ experiences.” p. 52. This includes empathy, validation, disclosure, and transparency. Beginning with openness when facing a conflict builds trust, demonstrates a desire to understand, an honoring emotion/experience, and paves the way through the conflict.
2. Resourceful- Resourcefulness first asks if the other person would like assistance, support, or ideas. If there is openness to receiving assistance, then together, resources can be explored and considered.
3. Persistence- “Persistence tunes out distractions, while Openness embraces novelty. Persistence keeps working toward a goal, while Openness revels in the moment, Persistence focuses on task completion, while Openness focuses on affirming people. Persistence says ‘don’t stop until you are done,’ while Openness says, “stop and smell the roses.” p. 125.
4. Open- Returning to “openness” allows additional relationship building, trust, and information to surface.

### *Unconditional Positive Regard*

While this concept has been around for quite some time, Betty Pries uses “unconditional positive regard” as a foundation for additional steps in moving through conflict. Based on her deep

Mennonite faith and her years of experience as a consultant, Pries begins and ends with the belief that the image of God is present in each individual.

Pries identifies ten “principles for managing conflict (145-149);

1. Time helps. Our first response to conflict may not be our best response.
2. Preparation matters. Reflecting thoughtfully on our past responses to conflict and learning from those experiences can better prepare us for the next conflict.
3. Thoughtful responses level the playing field. A thoughtful response is both kind and honest.
4. Each of us has a need to be seen and heard. Recognize the humanity in the other person.
5. Each person is climbing a mountain. Recognize that there is typically a “back-story” to a person’s actions.
6. A little emotional distance is helpful. Often in conflict, we experience a personal attack and become defensive.
7. Too much emotional distance is a problem. An ability to be empathetic demonstrates our humanity. We aren’t machines.
8. Find the yes-able statements. What can you agree with in the other person?
9. Honor the kernel of wisdom in each person. Each person’s perspective carries a kernel of truth.
10. Practice unconditional positive regard. Recognize the full humanity of each person.

### *Move Toward Conflict*

David Brubaker in *When the Center Doesn’t Hold*, states, “As conflict emerges in an organization or other system, conflict savvy leaders move toward it when it’s small, rather than avoid it and allow the conflict to grow larger. They do this in two ways. First, they invite disagreement by encouraging members of the system to come to them directly when they have a concern. Second, such leaders take the initiative to approach others, rather than avoid them, when they sense a strained relationship, and encourage others to do the same. These leaders model direct engagement and encourage others to do likewise.” (42)

### *Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love*

[https://mcusacdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Agreeing\\_and\\_Disagreeing\\_in\\_Love.pdf](https://mcusacdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Agreeing_and_Disagreeing_in_Love.pdf)

This document has been utilized by Mennonite Church USA for several years. It remains a helpful guide to working through conflict. Deeply rooted in Matthew 18 guidance, Mennonite theologians and conflict resolution practitioners have raised important cautions about a rigid implementation of these steps. These concerns include:

1. If abuse (physical, emotional, spiritual) has occurred, ensuring that future abuse does not occur is critical.
2. Insisting on a one-to-one interaction between the one experiencing harm and the one accused of harm may cause greater harm. Differences in power dynamics should be considered. Also, providing for an ally or support person during this step may be appropriate.
3. Insisting on “forgiveness” or “reconciliation” as the only acceptable outcome is not a helpful way to begin. Adults cannot be made to forgive or reconcile. This is a choice that takes time, reflection, spiritual depth, and healing. Even then, forgiveness and reconciliation cannot be assumed.

### *Non anxious Presence*

Family Systems practitioners have identified the essential stance of maintaining a “non anxious presence” in the midst of conflict. Peter L. Steinke says it this way. “The non anxious presence involves engagement, being there and taking the heat if need be, witnessing the pain, and yet not fighting fire with fire. The non anxious presence means we are aware of our own anxiety and the anxiety of others, but we will not let either determine our actions.”

-Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times* (37)

While this may be easier said than done, the following are ways that some have found to find their nonanxious space.

1. Take some deep breaths before responding.
2. Be curious and open.
3. State that you would like some time before responding.
4. Practice centering prayer or other prayer practices.
5. Recognize the things that “hook” you and choosing not to get “hooked.”
6. Practice unconditional positive regard.
7. Seek counsel; from a pastor, spiritual director, coach, or trusted friend

### **Common Conflict Situations that Arise in Congregations**

*Pastor Evaluations:* Because pastor evaluations can be a source of anxiety, they are sometimes ignored, delayed, or hastily constructed. At their best, pastor evaluations provide helpful feedback that can build confidence, provide support, and suggest areas of growth that lead to healthy and effective ministry. Effective evaluation processes include:

1. Clarify what group is responsible for conducting evaluations.
2. Establish a regular pattern for feedback and evaluation. Annually by a leadership group. Every three years by the congregation.
3. Ask the pastor to engage in the process throughout, including approval of the process before it is shared with the congregation.
4. Communicate clearly to the pastor and congregation in advance how the evaluation will be conducted and how the results will be shared.
5. Require that evaluations be signed. No anonymous evaluation forms.
6. A summary of the compiled results of the evaluation are shared with the pastor before they are shared with the congregation. Actual (verbatim) responses are not shared with the pastor or congregation.
7. MC USA resources for evaluations can be found at:

<https://www.mennoniteusa.org/resource-portal/resource/pastor-congregation-evaluation/>

*Memos of Understanding and Job Descriptions:* Every pastor, whether volunteer, parttime, or fulltime must have a written and signed memo/covenant of understanding that clarifies compensation, benefits, and job responsibilities. These should be reviewed annually. Conflicts sometimes arise when there are unclear expectations, assumptions, or changes that aren’t clearly processed or communicated. When significant financial situations change for either the congregation or the pastor, there must be conversation about a way forward. Best practices include:

1. Clarify what group is responsible for creating, reviewing, and signing these documents.
2. Review annually, with the pastor, these documents. Make adjustments as necessary. Communicate significant changes clearly and in a timely manner.
3. Clarify to whom staff are directly accountable.

4. Utilize resources from MC USA: <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/resource-portal/resource/pastor-congregation-relations/>

*Communication Failures:* Congregations are volunteer organizations. Leadership changes often. People come and go. Assumptions are made about who knows what and where responsibility lies. When pastors and lay leaders fail to communicate, conflict often follows. Best practices include:

1. Establish and share agenda for meetings in advance.
2. Clarify who is responsible for carrying out decisions and how follow-up will happen.
3. Clarify who is responsible or empowered to communicate with the whole congregation.
4. With so many ways of communicating, determine how congregational and committee communications will be done.
5. Communicate often, even when there isn't much to report. This is especially important when major decisions are being processed.

*Theological Disagreements:* Congregations are diverse, and perspectives change over time. As faith communities which expect the Holy Spirit to be present, we anticipate that God's wisdom will continue to be revealed, sometimes in new and confusing ways. (Read the book of Acts!)

When theological disagreements occur:

1. Review "Approaches to Conflict" above.
2. Review your mission, vision, and values documents. They are your best guide for discerning who you are and what you believe together. Sometimes they need to be updated.
3. Reflect on how the congregation has entered into discernment in the past. How well did it work? Are there other approaches available?
4. Would the congregation benefit from an outside facilitator?

*Bullying, Threats and Negative Behaviors:* Congregations are made up of people. People are complex. Unhealthy behaviors are common in congregations just as they are in the broader community. When unhealthy behaviors are ignored and allowed to continue, the entire congregation can be affected. Approaches to addressing unhealthy behaviors include:

1. Review "Approaches to Conflict" above.
2. Develop a code of conduct or guidelines for communication that are agreed upon by the congregation. These should include how to "call out" unhealthy behavior. Leaders or facilitators should be empowered to name the unhealthy behavior and insist that it stop.
3. Discern if the behavior is a one-time event or an ongoing pattern.
4. While we don't practice "shunning," there may be times when someone is asked to stay away from the congregation or away from a particular person until certain behaviors change. This is especially true of bullying, threats of harm, or actual harm committed against someone.
5. Threats of withholding contributions, leaving the congregation, or resigning from committees are manipulative and inappropriate. They should be named and addressed.

*Pastor Health Crisis:* When the pastor experiences a significant health crisis, contact the conference minister immediately so that a plan for pastoral coverage and care for the pastor and family can be developed.

*Inequality; Sexism, Racism, Economic/Social Discrimination:* Our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* states, “The church calls, trains, and appoints gifted men and women to a variety of leadership ministries on its behalf.” (59) *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership* does not discriminate based on race, culture, economic status, or gender in terms of who can be called and ordained for ministry. Additionally, our Central District Conference Ministerial Committee considers all candidates for ministerial leadership equally regardless of gender, sexual orientation, race, etc. However, both church and secular culture retains elements of sexism, gender, racial, and economic inequality. Such inequality is often embedded in the ways decisions are made, who is appointed to lay leadership roles, who is listened to, who has authority, and who is qualified to lead. Often sexist, gendered or racial comments are subtle. Sometimes they are explicit. Most often it is women, racial minorities, those with lower socioeconomic status, and LGBTQIA+ individuals who most frequently fall victim to sexism, racism, and economic injustice. It is important that church leaders and congregations find ways to grow in equity and equality so that the fullness of God’s gifts can be released in the congregation. Some ways to grow in equality include:

1. Review, revise, and update policies and church structures, making sure that they are not biased toward any class. Note that sometimes church documents refer to scripture texts that seemingly limit who is eligible to serve based on gender. (e.g. I Timothy 3:12 states, “Let deacons be the husband of one wife, and let them manage their children and their households well.” Does this mean women and those without children are not able to serve in leadership?)
2. Provide regular preaching and teaching on the giftedness of all disciples for service and ministry, regardless of gender, race, socioeconomic status, etc.
3. State publicly and clearly that your church welcomes and affirms the gifts of all.
4. Adopt a process for members to register concerns when bias or discrimination is experienced.
5. Use care and caution when utilizing Matthew 18 as a process for engaging conflict. Make sure that those with less power are not made to confront those with more power without providing an advocate or support person.
6. In church meetings, identify someone to listen carefully for language that belittles, demeans, criticizes, or dismisses others based on their sex, gender, race, or status. This person can provide a listening report to the congregation following the meeting, identifying ways to grow in equity and justice.
7. Choose words and language carefully and steer away from culture-war extremes.

## Resources for Congregational Discernment and Mediation

**And Beyond Improv.** [andrea@andbeyondimprov.com](mailto:andrea@andbeyondimprov.com) <https://www.andbeyondimprov.com/>  
Andrea Flack-Wetherald. Provides group and individual coaching around resiliency, having brave conversations, forgiveness, confidence, etc.

**Credence & Co.** <http://congregations.credenceandco.com/> Kitchener, Ontario  
*Guided by our core values of Love, Listen, and Lead, Credence & Co. provides consulting services to churches and other faith-based organizations. Through a process that is tailor-made to the unique needs of your group, we make a commitment to love and listen while also leading your congregation with a spirit of integrity.*

Betty Pries is CEO and a senior consultant. She is also an adjunct professor at AMBS. *With over 20 years experience coaching, mediating, facilitating, training, consulting and public speaking, Betty is highly regarded as a Conflict, Change and Leadership Specialist.*

**Lombard Mennonite Peace Center** <https://lmpeacecenter.org/> Lombard, Illinois  
*We provide speakers and education resources for churches of all denominations on biblical peace and justice issues, as well as conflict transformation skills training and training for church leaders grounded in family systems theory. We also provide mediation and consultation services for churches, schools, and other organizations.*

**Healthy Congregations** <http://www.healthycongregations.com/> Columbus, OH  
*Healthy Congregations is an interfaith organization that understands the times in which we live in. We equip leaders for challenges of thinking more clearly about families, relationships, and faith communities. Our resources and training are based on seeing all communities as living systems that incorporate thinking, feeling, responsibility, and purpose. Healthy Congregations, Inc. has created educational resources and leadership development material designed with the purpose of encouraging healthier, clearer and deeper individual and community life based on the contributions of leaders in the field of Bowen Theory and congregational life.*

**The Center for Congregations:** <https://centerforcongregations.org/> Ft. Wayne, IN  
*The Center for Congregations strengthens Indiana congregations by helping them find and use the best resources to address their challenges and opportunities.*

**The Center for Justice and Peacemaking** <https://emu.edu/cjp/> Harrisonburg, VA  
*CJP is primarily an educational and training organization that develops skills in conflict resolution, trauma support (STAR), peacebuilding, sustainability, justice, etc. David Brubaker and other faculty/staff of the program are also available to congregations and organizations experiencing conflict.*

**Venture International:** <http://vianswers.com/about.html> Goshen, IN and Hudsonville, MI  
*Our specialty areas include crisis and conflict management, leadership assessment, training, and brand management. We understand that answers to challenges can be found through systematic discovery. We do not provide clients with answers; we provide team members with tools to help clients discover their own answers, using systematic problem-solving, data-driven products, strategic communication, and training practices. Curt Bechler, Managing Partner, was former director of Camp Friedenswald.*

**First Element:** [Leadership Communication Training With Compassionate Accountability | Next Element \(next-element.com\)](https://next-element.com)

With insightful assessment and diagnostics, focused consulting, and targeted training and coaching services, we help you zero in on the most important next steps to build your culture of Compassionate Accountability®.

Experience our unique thought leadership through keynote presentations, books, and published resources. Or, put our powerful frameworks and models in your hands with train-the-trainer certifications. We offer a complete suite of services to embed Compassionate Accountability into the fabric of your organization.

**Design Group International:** <https://www.designgroupinternational.com/> Sheboygan Falls, WI

*We are a community of process consultants—but the work we do goes well beyond process improvement. As process consultants, we are experts at coming alongside you and your organization to help you understand where you are and where you want to go. If we had to reveal our superpower it would be helping you gain a clear vision of your future and the steps needed to get there.*

*As seasoned professionals, we share our experiences, market trends, and what we've learned along the way. However, we are not selling a solution du jour. Your organization and your goals are unique and you deserve something more. As process consultants, our role is to work with you to co-create right-fit solutions that move you closer to achieving your goals. A number of staff have Mennonite connections.*

**The Colossian Way:** <https://colossianforum.org/the-colossian-way-experience/> The Colossian Way equips Christians to experience the transforming power of conflict. An innovative method based upon traditional Christian practices, The Colossian Way helps Christians practice loving God and each other while engaging difficult disagreements.

**Melissa Hofstetter: Clinical Therapist and Psychological Evaluations**

My name is Melissa Hofstetter. I am ordained in the Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference, and have worked as a psychological consultant to the Church of the Brethren (the Pacific Southwest district) for the last several years, providing ministry-informed psychological assessment batteries to ministry candidates on behalf of their District/Area Conference-- a program I've called "Readiness for Ministry". My hope is that this offers support to both the District and its ministry candidates in their personal and vocational development.

As a psychologist and a minister, myself, I've offered comprehensive reports to the District, assisting the District in doing its due diligence in screening for emotional wholeness in the candidates who are preparing for ministry. These include in-depth clinical interviews, historical intakes/background information forms, psychological testing for significant clinical pathology that could wreak havoc in faith communities, identification of relative strengths which may be applied to ministry, and making recommendations to the District and the candidate toward their calling to ministry and wholeness.

Licensed as a psychologist to offer such assessments via telehealth in Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, & Wisconsin - and as of 3/31/23, Michigan.



**Books:**

*Conflict Without Casualties: A Field Guide for Leading with Compassionate Accountability*, by Nate Regier, Oakland: Berrette-Koehler Publishers, Inc. 2017.

*Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being calm and courageous no matter what*; Peter L. Steinke, Alban Institute, 2006

*Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership*; Dan Hotchkiss, Alban Institute 2009

*How the Body of Christ Talks*; C. Christopher Smith, Brazos Press, 2019

*How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You are Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*; Author: Susan Beaumont. Alban Institute 2019

*In Tune With God: The Art Of Congregational Discernment*; Sally Weaver Glick

*Peaceful Practices; A guide to healthy communication in conflict*; Mennonite Central Committee, 2022

*Reawakened; Activate Your Congregation to Spark Lasting Change*, Glen Guyton (Executive Director of Mennonite Church, USA), Herald Press, 2021

*The Soul of Discernment: A Spiritual Practice for Communities and Institutions*  
By Elizabeth Liebert, 2015, Westminster John Know Press

*The Space Between Us; Conversations about Transforming Conflict*; Betty Pries, Herald Press, 2021

*Uproar: Calm Leadership in Anxious Times*; Peter Steinke; Rowman and Littlefield, 2019

*We make the road by walking; A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation*, Brian McClaren, FaithWords, 2014

*When the Center Does Not Hold: Leading in an Age of Polarization*. Brubaker, David R., Everett N. Brubaker, Carolyn E. Yoder, and Teresa J. Haase. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019.

*Winsome Conviction; Disagreeing without dividing the church*; Tim Muehlhoff, Intervarsity Press

**Other:**

[The Hope-Filled Persistence of Women in Ministry](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyPPI_ubb6)- A YouTube Video  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyPPI\\_ubb6](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyPPI_ubb6)

[Racism and White Privilege](https://mcusacdc.org/white-privilege-racism/)- A variety of resources on the CDC Website:  
<https://mcusacdc.org/white-privilege-racism/>