

Conflict Literacy and Management in Conversation with the National Certification Standards of the Alliance for the Certification of Lay Ecclesial Ministry

*provided by Dr. Ann Garrido and reprinted with her permission
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Tension is part of every healthy community—including Christian community. People only argue about things that they care about and where conflict is reported absent from a community’s life, it is often an indication that the community doesn’t have capacity to talk about their disagreements, or worse, the community has become apathetic about their mission and life together and simply no longer care.

Persons serving in church leadership roles should not expect that because the community they are serving is Christian they will not have to deal with conflict, or that something is wrong with the community because there is conflict. Rather, they should anticipate that conflict will be a part of every community’s life and equip themselves to be able to manage and transform that conflict in healthy directions that deepen the community’s commitment to mission and a common life. The vision and skills required to “do conflict well” are suggested throughout the four-fold structure of *Co-Workers in the Vineyard* and the PPF, and at the same time could possibly be drawn out a bit more explicitly.

In this document, I have identified areas where some degree of conflict “literacy” (i.e. an understanding of the dynamics of conflict and skills for healthy conflict management) could be considered to help draw out competencies in the arena of conflict management more explicitly.

Capacities Needed to Manage Conflict Effectively

There are a number of skills needed to be able to manage conflict effectively in ministry settings (and beyond). It is helpful in ministry formation to isolate these skills and address them one-by-one before then looking at how they work together in the art of difficult conversation.

- ***A recognition of patterns of triangulation and a commitment to sidestep such patterns*** – Triangulation is a pattern of avoiding direct conversation with those we are in tension with instead favoring talking about our problems with others and trying to get them “on our side.” Triangulation flourishes in contexts where people value kindness and where they feel they have little access to official channels for “getting things done.” As such, it flourishes in church life, especially among LEM’s. Formation for conflict management needs to involve practice identifying triangulation, its effects on community life, and ways to sidestep the dynamic.
- ***A capacity to hold with curiosity different perspectives and ask questions to deepen understanding*** – In difficult situations, we all have a story about what is going on and those stories do not align. We often agree on the “facts” of the situation, but disagree about which facts are the ones we should be paying attention to; which ones are most relevant; and what we should do about them. We are pretty sure the other is missing

critical information. But in order to become effective at conflict, we need to learn how to be able to hold our own stories in conversation with others' stories and come to greater clarity about why we see things differently. This requires the ability to adopt a stance of curiosity; listen well; ask illuminating questions; and summarize without judgment. There are exercises we can do as part of conflict formation to help develop these skills.

- ***An ability to distinguish between intent and impact*** – A common factor in most situations of conflict is that intent and impact become conflated. If we have good intentions, we think that the other person should recognize those good intentions and not be angry with us, even if they were impacted negatively by our actions. However, if we have been badly impacted by another's actions, we are generally certain that they intended to hurt us, or at least have some sort of chronic character flaw (eg. insensitivity, callousness, self-centeredness). Formation for conflict management can draw attention to this dynamic and give practice separating the two in conversation.
- ***A capacity to frame in terms of contribution rather than blame*** – Another common dynamic when tensions run high is the propensity to try to figure out who is "at fault" and what kinds of consequences or punishment there should be for a person's actions. Organizations that operate out of a paradigm of blame are organizations of low productivity and low morale. People work in silos rather than collaboratively. Effective conflict management reframes attributions of blame into a conversation around contribution: What all contributed to this problem happening? What could each of us change so that we don't keep getting stuck in the same situation? Formation for conflict management can draw attention to the challenges of a blame mindset and offer concrete suggestions for how to reframe to have a different sort of conversation focused on understanding what happened and how to have it not happen again.
- ***A capacity to acknowledge and express the feelings that are part of every conflict*** – We may wish that feelings could not be part of our difficult conversations; that we could just "stick to the facts." But feelings are "facts" in the sense that they are actual physical sensations in the body, and they are a part of what is making the conversation hard in the first place. Whether we want them there or not, they are. Effective conflict management requires skill in bringing the feelings that are part of every conflict to the surface and figuring out how to best manage them (both our own and others) in the conversation. Conflict formation needs to offer a psychologically-sound understanding of the role that emotions play in human life and pastoral strategies for acknowledging and working with them.
- ***An awareness of where one's own sense of self is implicated in the conflict*** – Each of us likes to think of ourselves in a particular way and we would love if others also saw us in that light. One of the most challenging aspects of being in tension with another person is that we are being given clues we are not showing up in the world the way that we would like, creating self-doubt, defensiveness, etc. Effective conflict management requires that we have a balanced and humble sense of self—knowing both our strengths and our weaknesses—and knowing that there is still more of ourselves we have yet to know. We are "enough" while always on the way to becoming "more." Conflict formation works in

harmony with human/spiritual formation in developing the virtues of humility and self-acceptance necessary to receive feedback well and learn from it.

- ***An ability to integrate Christian practice and ritual around forgiveness and repentance*** – All of the above skills and capacities are widely acknowledged as necessary in the secular world for managing conflicts well. A distinctive contribution persons of faith, especially Christians, bring to the realm of conflict transformation are our practices and rituals around forgiveness and repentance. From a faith stance, neither of these is a human capacity but rather a divine capacity that God shares with human beings so that we are not locked in an eternal tit-for-tat but rather can participate in God’s desire for a “new creation.” Forgiveness is a gift that God gives to one who has been aggrieved to be able to let go of the hurt and not continue to be hurt each time one remembers the past. Repentance is a gift that God gives to one who has done the “aggrieving” so that they become aware of the full impact of their actions on another and can apologize and attempt recompense. Conflict formation works in harmony with human/spiritual formation to develop capacities for forgiveness and repentance, as well as fostering connections particularly to the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist.
- ***Skills for creative problem-solving based on meeting interests rather than getting locked in positions*** – At some point the conversation needs to move from listening and understanding to “Where do we go from here?” Effective conflict management requires creativity in establishing next steps that both parties can agree to and that feel fair/workable. The field of negotiation science has a framework and range of exercises that can be incorporated into conflict formation to help future ministers be able to separate interests from positions, search for objective criteria, and seek ZOPA’s (Zones of Possible Agreement) while also working on BATNA’s (Best Alternatives to a Negotiated Agreement – i.e. what’s our back up plan if we don’t have a ZOPA?)
- ***Mature prudential judgment*** – In the end, there is no step-by-step “how to” guide for working your way through a conflict. Conflict management is an art form in which the practitioner takes the above micro-skills and weaves them into conversation in every new and creative ways, knowing when to bring in which skills when as the situation unfolds. Is it time to problem solve? Is it time to listen more? Should I acknowledge feelings now? Should I let this go? These are in-the-minute decisions that one makes and there is no one right way to go. Formation for conflict management works in harmony with all elements of ministry formation that seek to help the minister grow in the virtue of prudence, often developed through life experience and reflection on that life experience.

Available Resources for Developing Conflict Literacy among Catholic Ministers

I've attempted to do a preliminary search for resources that might be helpful to consider how to further develop in ministry formation programs the capacities and skills necessary for healthy conflict. There are some challenges in narrowing the search appropriately: There are a number of Catholic books and programs that deal with international peace building efforts and interracial healing and family systems work that draw on a lot of the same skills sets, but seem too broad to include. There are also a variety of books available on managing conflict in the context of Protestant / Evangelical congregations. These might be helpful to consider, but the way the Scriptures are used in these books and the case studies offered are not always easy to translate into a Catholic context.

At the same time, Catholic literature on this topic for parish ministers appears remarkably thin. In addition to my own work [*Redeeming Conflict: 12 Habits for Christian Leaders*](#) (Ave Maria Press, 2016) and the free study guide that goes alongside it <https://www.avemariapress.com/product/20063/The-Redeeming-Conflict-Small-Group-Guide/>, here are several others that can be useful.

In terms of additional resources written out of a Catholic context, see:

Nordenbrock, William CPPS. *Beyond Accompaniment: Guiding a Fractured Community to Wholeness*. (Liturgical Press, 2011)

Stewart, Sr. Mary Catherine OP and Ellen M. O'Keefe. *Tools for Conflict Resolution: A Practical K-12 Program Based on Peter Senge's 5th Discipline*. (R&L Education 2004)

There are a number of very helpful books that come out of the business context that are very practical and easily translatable into Church life:

Fisher, Roger and Dan Shapiro. *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate*. (Penguin, 2006)

Fisher, Roger and William Ury. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. (Penguin 2011)

Patterson, Kerry et al. *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*. (McGraw-Hill Education, 2011)

Stone, Doug and Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen. *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* (Penguin, 2010)

Stone, Doug and Sheila Heen. *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*. (Penguin, 2015)

And then there are a couple of websites and university programs that might have additional knowledge of resources and personnel who work in this arena:

Beyond Intractability: <https://www.beyondintractability.org/moos>

- Joint website for both Beyond Intractability and CRInfo, both created by the Conflict Information Consortium of Boulder, CO. Includes many articles / papers written by students at the Kroc Center for International Peace Studies at the U. of Notre Dame.
- Catholic Peacebuilding Network: <https://kroc.nd.edu/research/religion-conflict-peacebuilding/catholic-peacebuilding-network/>
- Joan B Kroc School of Peace Studies - <https://www.sandiego.edu/peace/programs/ms-cmr/>
- School of Conflict Studies – University of St. Paul, Ottawa - <https://ustpaul.ca/conflict-studies.php>

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