



Connecting Faith and Life

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Session at a Glance

Human beings have differing and often strong opinions and ideas about a variety of topics. Such differences can lead to conflicts, stalemates, and broken relationships. How can Christians respect different points of view and use them in creative ways for the good of all?



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Creative Conflict

by Jim Hawkins and Jeanne Torrence Finley

A Blessing or a Curse

Some issues facing our nation provoke strong and seemingly irreconcilable opinions. A recent example is the much debated health-care reform bill. Other issues include gun rights, same-sex marriage, war, abortion, and economic bailouts. Churches disagree about worship styles, biblical authority, and models of funding. Our families face these and other intractable struggles. Conflict over a myriad of issues is a reality in the workplace.

At times these controversies seem impossible to resolve and impossible to ignore. All too often, disagreements can result in hurt feelings, anger, and broken relationships.

Is there another way? Can Christians model a different, more Christ-like approach? Can we see differences of opinions as blessings and use them in creative ways for the good of all?

A Different Perspective

Jan Love, the dean of United Methodist-related Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, says that conflict is not only to be expected but also should be seen as beneficial. “Most of us learn a lot and even experience great growth and revelation about our faith when we encounter conflict. Conflict can be profoundly productive and can be engaged constructively,” she says. Of course, conflict can also be destructive. She explains, “The key is to engage conflict well, to make it productive and to use it for building up the body of Christ and the well-being of humanity.”

Love asserts that unity does not eliminate differences or conflicts. It does require, however, that we change the way we view conflict. Instead of seeing conflict as an opportunity to defeat our enemies, we should look at it as a chance to grow in faith.

Such a perspective can also be helpful in the business world. “When managed effectively, conflict can be a means to increased creativity and productivity in the workplace,” according to Ann Pace, associate editor for *Training + Development* magazine. A recent study conducted by Carolina Precision Plastics (CPP) asked 5,000 employees in North America and Europe about their attitudes toward conflict. Forty-nine percent said that personality clashes were the primary cause of conflict, followed by stress and heavy workloads.

The average employee spends slightly more than two hours a week dealing with conflict. The survey found that personal insults, sickness, and missing work were among the negative outcomes of workplace conflict. However, 76 percent of participants pointed to major innovations, better solutions, and increased motivation as positive outcomes of conflict.

Core Bible Passages: Old Testament

The **Book of Exodus** highlights the importance of listening. The journey of the Hebrew slaves to freedom began when Moses listened to God calling to him from a burning bush (**3:1-17**). Moses was afraid that the Hebrew people would not believe him or even listen to him (**4:1**), a fear that proved correct (**6:9**).

Moses also feared that Pharaoh would not listen to him since Moses believed himself to be an inadequate speaker (**6:12, 30**). God responded to this fear by having Moses' brother, Aaron, be his spokesperson; yet God warned that even with Aaron's superior speaking skills, Pharaoh would still not listen at first (**7:1-5**).

It took a whole series of plagues for Pharaoh to concede to God's demand to free the Hebrew slaves. Scripture records that after several of the plagues, Pharaoh's heart remained hardened to God's call of freedom (**8:19; 9:7, 12**). After other plagues, Pharaoh first agreed to free the Hebrews before his heart hardened again (**8:8-15, 25-32; 9:27-35; 10:16-20, 24-29**).

Even after a tenth plague, in which the firstborn in every Egyptian household was killed, Pharaoh acquiesced at first (**12:31-32**) and then hardened his heart again (**14:5-9**). This final refusal to listen led to disaster: the death of Pharaoh's army (**14:26-31**).

"The most significant study result is the connection between conflict training and the reduction in negative consequences of conflict," said Rich Thompson, the director of research at CPP. "Training does not reduce the occurrence of conflict, but it clearly has an impact on how conflict is perceived and can mitigate the negative outcomes associated with conflict." The survey found that almost all respondents who received conflict training said they benefited from that training in some way, including being more comfortable dealing with conflict and getting more positive results for all involved in it.

Shaped by Emotion

"Our efforts to communicate with one another are filled with and shaped by emotion," writes W. Craig Gilliam, the director of The Center for Pastoral Effectiveness for the Louisiana Annual Conference. He states that when important relationships are broken, communication and communion are broken, too.

"When we are anxious, for example, our ability to hear or connect genuinely with another human being lessens," according to Gilliam. "To deepen connection or clarify communication, one must first lower the anxiety or static. Only then will we see a significant increase in our ability to hear and connect soulfully."

In his work with congregations in conflict, Gilliam suggests a "Listening to Each Other" session, which he has discovered to be one of the most effective ways for groups to move from conflict to communion. The session is designed to model effective listening and speaking, remove what Gilliam calls "toxicity," and allow everyone to have a voice.

Communication Skills

According to David Olson, founder and CEO of Life Innovations, two basic communication skills that can help transform conflict from a curse to a blessing are active listening and assertiveness. Good communication involves not only speaking but also careful listening. Disagreements can blow up into battles when we do not believe we have been heard. Active listening not only helps the listener understand what is being said but also helps the speaker know that he or she has been heard.

Assertiveness differs from aggressiveness. Assertive speech is respectful, polite, positive, and constructive—not attacking or blaming. Olson encourages the use of "I" statements, instead of beginning a message with "you," which is a hallmark of assertiveness.

For example, "You never select contemporary songs for worship." In order to make this an assertive statement with an "I" message instead of a "you" message, the speaker could say, "I would like us to sing contemporary songs in worship more frequently." In this way, the speaker takes ownership of the message and clearly states what she or he wants. This polite request is more likely to set the stage for productive discussion than the statement beginning with "you," which could cause the listener to become defensive.

Core Bible Passages: New Testament

Ephesians 4:1-16 gives guidance for how Christians should deal with conflict. The Christians of Ephesus were reminded to be gentle and patient and to bear with one another in love. They were to make “every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (**verse 3**). We are the body of Christ; and when we work together, when we speak the truth in love, we are equipped for ministry and mature in Christ.

The first Christians needed such reminders. Conflicts threatened to tear the early church apart. One of the most heated controversies was whether Gentiles first needed to convert to Judaism and follow Jewish law before they could become Christians (**Acts 15**). Paul and his allies held that such conversion not only was unnecessary but was also an impediment to the gospel. Others argued that circumcision and keeping the law of Moses were required for all Christians.

Christian leaders from far and near gathered in Jerusalem to consider the matter. There was much debate, then testimony from Peter and Barnabas and Paul (**verses 7-12**), followed by James voicing the consensus of the council (**verses 13-21**). What is striking is how the council participants listened to one another (**verse 12**), turned to Scripture (**verses 15-17**), found a creative solution (**verses 19-21**), and then communicated that decision (**verses 22-31**).

Academic Controversy

Academic controversy is a formal learning process that can provide a model for how to respect different points of view and use them in creative ways for the benefit of all. This process was developed by David and Roger Johnson, brothers who are professors at the University of Minnesota, to help college students and teachers work through intellectual conflicts.

Students form groups of four. Each small group is divided into two pairs, with each pair given one of two opposing positions in the conflict. The pairs then follow five steps: (1) Research the issue and develop a convincing argument for their assigned view. (2) Present their position, then listen while the other pair presents their argument. The listening pair analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of the other pair’s line of reasoning. (3) Openly discuss, with both pairs continuing to advocate their view and rebutting the other pair’s argument. (4) Switch perspectives, with each pair presenting the most convincing argument for what used to be the opposing view. Again, the listening pair analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of the presenting line of reasoning. (5) Both pairs come together to select the strongest points of each view, then synthesize them into a new position. The group of four then develops a joint report on the agreed viewpoint.

The Johnsons have also developed the following rules to facilitate the process: (1) Participants are to be critical of ideas but not people. (2) They should focus on coming to the best possible decision, not on winning. (3) All are encouraged to participate, to listen to the ideas of others, and to seek clarification of those ideas. (4) The students promise to bring out all the ideas and facts that would support both sides and then put them together in a way that makes sense. (5) All participants pledge to change their opinions if the evidence clearly indicates they should do so.

While academic controversy is a learning process similar to debate, there are key differences. Debate is competitive, with two sides competing against each other; only one side can win a debate. Academic controversy is cooperative, with both sides working together to develop a mutually agreeable resolution; the goal is a win-win outcome.

According to David Johnson, the aim of academic controversy “is for the individuals involved to reach the best reasoned judgment possible by giving all points of view a fair and complete hearing and viewing the issue from all perspectives. Controversies are an inherent part of reaching a reasoned judgment, making decisions, and being a citizen in a democracy.”

Although academic controversy was developed as a learning technique for college classrooms, it can be used in other settings as well. Families and congregations could adopt academic controversy steps in order to work through seemingly unsolvable conflicts.

Call to Peacemaking

The 2008 General Conference issued a call for peacemaking based on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and his call for us to love our enemies, pray for those who hurt us, and forgive those who sin against us. Resolution 6091, "A Call for Peacemaking," states that "for The United Methodist Church peacemaking is an essential task for achieving success in other initiatives," including eliminating poverty and caring for children (*The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 2008*; page 851). In addition, the resolution asserts that peacemaking is a characteristic of vital congregations.

The resolution calls on United Methodists "to become peacemakers wherever they are—at home, school, work, in the local community and the wider world—and to show the love, compassion, and concern for justice that Jesus taught and lived." Local congregations are urged "to teach and practice peacemaking, to study underlying causes of conflict among social groups and nations, to seek positive remedies and become instruments of peace."

Annual conferences are encouraged to help congregations by offering training, support, and encouragement for congregational peacemaking efforts. Conferences are also to "be voices for peace, justice, and reconciliation." Bishops are asked "to encompass peacemaking in teaching what it means to live the United Methodist way, engage in conflict resolution where appropriate, and offer a prophetic voice for peace and justice."

Opportunities to Grow

Conflict is inevitable, but in the midst of it we can make thoughtful decisions on how we can manage it creatively. We can work together to develop win-win solutions instead of attacking opponents and focus on active listening and assertiveness in order to reach solutions.

Instead of viewing conflict as a curse to be avoided, we can choose to embrace differing points of view and welcome them as opportunities to grow. Then not only can conflict be seen as a potential blessing, it can also help us respect one another as children of God.

Presbyterian Model

In 1992, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) developed the following guidelines for congregations to use during times of disagreement:

- ◆ Treat each other respectfully so as to build trust, believing that we all desire to be faithful to Jesus the Christ.
- ◆ Learn about various positions on the topic of disagreement.
- ◆ State what we think we heard and ask for clarification before responding, in an effort to be sure we understand each other.
- ◆ Share our concerns directly with individuals or groups with whom we have disagreements in a spirit of love and respect in keeping with Jesus' teachings.
- ◆ Focus on ideas and suggestions instead of questioning people's motives, intelligence or integrity.
- ◆ Share our personal experiences about the subject of disagreement so that others may more fully understand our concerns.
- ◆ Indicate where we agree with those of other viewpoints as well as where we disagree.
- ◆ Seek to stay in community with each other though the discussion may be vigorous and full of tension.
- ◆ Include our disagreements in prayers, not praying for triumph of our viewpoints, but seeking God's grace to listen attentively, to speak clearly, and to remain open to the vision God holds for us all.

Jim Hawkins is an elder in Delaware.

Jeanne Torrence Finley is director of Collegial Communications and an elder in the Virginia Conference.

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Creative Conflict

How can Christians respect different points of view and use them in creative ways for the good of all?

CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your group members and your group time, choose from among the OPEN, EXPLORE, and CLOSE activities or from “Teaching Alternative” to plan the session.

OPEN the Session

Pray Together

Choose a prayer of your own, or use the following: O God, you know how hectic our lives can be. Stillness is a rarity for our bodies, our minds, our souls, and sometimes our mouths. At times we do not listen to other people nor to you. Help us to be still and know that you are God. Help us learn to listen so we can listen to you and to one another; in Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

EXPLORE the Topic

Explore the News

Bring to the session newspapers and several pairs of scissors or highlighters. Tell participants that in today’s session the group will be exploring creative conflict. Ask them to look through a section of a newspaper and cut out or highlight stories of conflict. After a few minutes, ask for volunteers to present the controversial situations they discovered.

Ask: How many of the articles in the newspapers include conflict? What do the conflicts involve? Do some of them seem petty to you? Do some seem headed for a resolution? Do some seem impossible to resolve? Explain.

Discuss Conflict

Ask participants to stand. Designate one side of the room “Avoid Conflict” and the other side “Engage in Conflict.” Say: “During this activity, we will hear about different settings where conflict occurs. Please move to the side of the room that most closely matches your feelings about conflict in that situation.” (Do not mention the possibility of standing between the two positions. If asked, simply repeat the instructions.)

- ◆ At a party, the subject of gun rights comes up.
- ◆ At a congregational meeting, the group discusses the denomination’s stance on homosexuality.
- ◆ At a gathering of your extended family, you overhear a discussion of the national health-care policy.
- ◆ At a church meeting, the group discusses the congregation’s budget.
- ◆ While at a neighbor’s home for dinner, your host asks your opinion of corporate bailouts.

Ask participants to gather back in the larger group. Then ask: How often did people change from one side of the room to another for different situations? I did not specifically say that you could or could not stand between the two positions. Did anyone think to do so? Why or why not? When are you most comfortable with conflict? When are you least comfortable? What else have you learned from this activity?

Discuss Events in Exodus

Review “Core Bible Passages: Old Testament” (page 2). Ask: In what ways was listening important in the story of the Exodus? What would have happened if Pharaoh were committed to finding a win-win solution? What would have had to change to bring about such an outcome?

Discuss New Testament Scriptures

Silently review “Core Bible Passages: New Testament” (page 3) and Acts 15:1-31. Ask for a volunteer to read Ephesians 4:1-16. Form small teams of three or four to discuss the following: In what ways did the Jerusalem council function as the body of Christ? How did members of the council work together to deal with their disagreement? What conflict-resolution techniques did the Jerusalem council use? What might have happened if church leaders tried to avoid dealing with this conflict? What evidence do you see that the Holy Spirit was at work in this process?

Consider Communication Skills

Review “Communication Skills” (page 2). Ask: How do you see active listening and assertive speech playing a role in your congregation? in your family? in your work environment? What are some “you” statements you have used that have caused someone to become defensive? How could they have been reworded into more effective “I” statements?

Use the Academic Controversy Model

Review “Academic Controversy” (page 3). Ask participants to choose partners and select a controversy. Possibilities include the following: (1) Is violence on television damaging to young children? (2) Should the government restrict executive compensation of companies receiving federal funds? (3) Are traditional hymns or contemporary Christian songs more appropriate for worship in our congregation?

Encourage the pairs to engage in discussion that follows the academic controversy model. Then, in the larger group, ask: While this was a shortened attempt at using the academic controversy model, what insights do you have from trying it? In what ways is this model consistent with Scripture? How could this model be helpful for a discussion at church? in the workplace? at home? at a local government meeting? on the national stage?

CLOSE the Session

Explore a Hymn

Ask each participant to read the words to “Help Us Accept Each Other” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 560) in silence. After a few moments, ask: What words or phrases do you find particularly moving? What does this song suggest to you about creative conflict?

Invite participants to think of people or situations in their lives in need of reconciliation and to pray silently for mutual acceptance.

Pray Together

Pray the following prayer together, or choose one of your own: Help us to listen, O Lord. Help us to listen to our friends and our adversaries, to those with whom we agree and those with whom we disagree, so that we can listen to you. May we not be afraid of conflict but instead see it as a potential blessing. Help us to speak the truth in love and to listen to one another in love for the truth; in the name of Jesus Christ, the Reconciler, we pray. Amen.

Teaching Alternative

Review “Presbyterian Model” (page 4). Does your congregation have a set of guidelines to use during disagreements? If not, ask your pastor and church leadership about creating one.

As a group, prepare a presentation on how differences of opinions are blessings that can be used in creative ways for the good of all. Make a list of suggested guidelines for your congregation to consider.

Next Week in FAITHLINK

Imprisonment and Justice

The United States has the highest rate of incarceration in the world. What are the implications of this high rate of imprisonment? How do our Christian views of justice and mercy address this issue?