

SYSTEMS FOR MANAGING CONFLICT CONSTRUCTIVELY

by Karl S. Andersen

We live in a complex world during a complex time. The possibility of conflict can arise at any time and in any place. For these reasons, our Lombard Mennonite Peace Center Manual for facilitating healthy Pastor-Congregation Relations includes eleven pages which cover several topics related to conflict management. Here are the titles to those topics:

Educating for Conflict Transformation
Conflict Resolution Norms, Procedures and Structures
Congregational Decision-Making: a Collaboration Model
Congregational Mediation: An Overview of the Process
Congregational Mediation: Purpose and Typical outline of the Process
Types of Conflict
Levels of Conflict and Tension in Organizations

As an illustration of the efficiency of the conflict transformation model, the subjects of congregational mediation will be expanded in the following paragraphs.

CONGREGATIONAL MEDIATION: AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS

There now exists a tool for providing transformation of conflict in a congregation: that tool is named mediation. The process for mediation includes six phases---contracting, education, information gathering, healing, problem-solving and closure. Both healing and problem-solving are included: notice the order where healing precedes any problem-solving. The process is completed with a written report and a closing reconciliation service.

MEDIATION: PURPOSE AND TYPICAL OUTLINE OF THE PROCESS

The proposes for mediation number seven: discerning the exact nature of disagreement, giving all involved in the conflict a chance to air their views, reducing tension and facilitating healing in relationships, resolving the interests behind differing positions, teaching conflict transformation techniques, offering recommendations for improving current systems and doing all in ways which glorify God and strengthen the church. The process includes three stages: before on-site work, actual on-site work and follow-up work. The detailed work of these states speaks to the depth of care and the levels of compassion needed for mediation to be successful and transformation on-going.

TYPES OF CONFLICT

Eight types of conflict are identified in the Lombard Mennonite format for identifying conflict. Each of these eight types of conflict includes a listing of characteristics as well as a listing of interventions unique to that conflict. The types are: Values Conflict, Conflict over Goals or Methods, Structural Conflict, Lack of Success, Interpersonal Conflict, Charges of Clergy or Lay Leader Incompetence, Breach of Ethics and Bored, Apathetic and Frightened. Just as each type of conflict is carefully defined and described, the interventions for each conflict are carefully summarized and simply stated.

CONCLUSION

There are two impressions that this section leaves with me. First, the reality of conflict in a changing world is not only possible, but it is likewise manageable. In fact, conflict can be managed in such a way as to create transformation. The fact that conflict need not be divisive, but catalytic to creating stronger believers and stronger congregational life is hopeful and invigorating. The feelings which go with conflict----anger, disappointment and discouragement, to name a few---now can be focused and developed into new realities for persons and for congregations as well.

Second, conflict management has become a skill worthy of study and application. No longer do we need to hide conflict; now we can directly discover the type of conflict we are experiencing and we can work toward resolving that conflict. Our ability to identify, manage and resolve conflict becomes a modern day mark of our growing faith as persons and as a congregation.

No longer do we need to fear being paralyzed by conflict in our personal lives or in our worship lives as members of this congregation. Today, we have the promise and potential to manage conflict and to allow conflict to be transformative in our faith journey.