

# The Church's way of reconciliation and forgiveness

What is the church's way when facing conflict? Is there a pathway of faithfulness we can use to guide us? To guide the clergy and the laity.

## Use of authority

We first need to be clear regarding the authority of the priest-in-charge of parishes. Authority is given with a purpose – it is to provide pastoral oversight in the ministry of reconciliation. That's "the business" we are in – reconciliation. John Macquarrie notes, "What the New Testament – with Christ himself – undoubtable does condemn is the seeking of power and preeminence among Christians, and the exercise of authority in a self regarding way." Clergy and laity both get angry. They act in abusive ways because they are upset, angry, or afraid. It is very understandable. It's also wrong. The authority isn't given so we might indulge our feelings. We are given the ministry of reconciliation. If you can't find within yourself the Spirit's nudging you to long for reconciliation; then pursue it out of duty.

That caution about our priest-in-charge is offered because it's one of the most common ways we go astray. People don't appreciate us. Don't understand how hard it is. Don't realize the pain they cause us. All true at times. And in the face of all that, we are to do the Lord's business of reconciliation. We are to place the feelings of hurt and anger, of outrage and frustration, on a shelf; we are to acknowledge them, and we are to manage them in such a manner that we may be faithful in our vocation.

## Four guideposts

At the center are four guideposts; four ways of grace.

1. Timely & quickly
2. Face-to-face and those directly involved
3. Witnesses
4. Forgive

The four rise up out of our life of prayer and the sources of the church's authority.

First prayer, the depth and congruity of prayer life may have a significant influence on how conflicts are managed.

Second, the sources of authority: Scripture, Tradition, Reason

# Prayer

Martin Thornton wrote:

*Moral action only flows from doctrinal truth by grace and faith, that is through prayer.*

It's the ancient triangle -of worship, doctrine and action. Three aspects of Christian Life grounding our existence in Grace. We get from truth to moral action not directly but by way of prayer – Eucharist, Office, Personal Devotions (the threefold rule of prayer). They are our bridge into Grace.

Consider the depth and congruity of prayer life – that of the whole parish and also of the individuals involved in the conflict. Are there in the parish a significant number of people who live the threefold rule? Enough of a core to create an identifiable pattern? Enough to create a sense of stability? The threefold rule is the Prayer Book's pattern of prayer life. The more the parish lives in that pattern, the more there will be a sense of harmony and stability.

Depth, stability and congruence are part of the ground on which a community stands when it faces into disagreements and conflicts. A community in which a significant number knows the Eucharistic experience of oneness with each other and the whole company of heaven; a community that prays the scriptures each day in the Office; a community that is reflective and thoughtful about human responsibility – such a community will manage its conflicts more faithfully.

More directly:

- A parish that knows the Eucharistic experience of holy love and joy is a parish that knows what true community looks like, will value that life, and want to avoid the kinds of conflict that can destroy it.
- A parish that reads, marks, learns and inwardly digested the scriptures will have heard the practices of reconciliation and forgiveness as being at the center of Christian life.
- A parish that is thoughtful and reflective about human responsibility in daily life will be better equipped to face the times of conflict.

## Sources of Authority

### Scripture

*So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. (Matthew 5:23-25)*

*Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger (Ephesians 4:26)*

*Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. (1 John 4:20)*

*'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. (Matthew 18:15)*

*But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. (Matthew 18:16-17)*

*Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. (Luke 17:3)*

*Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. (Colossians 3:13)*

*and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:32)*

*Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. (Matthew 18:21-22)*

## Tradition

*When the priest sees that there is hatred between members of the congregation, he shall speak privately to them, telling them that they may not receive Communion until they have forgiven each other. And if the person or persons on one side truly forgive the others and desire and promise to make up for their faults, but those on the other side refuse to forgive, the priest shall allow those who are penitent to come to Communion, but not those who are stubborn. Disciplinary Rubrics BCP p. 409*

*Examine your lives and conduct by the rule of God's commandments, that you may perceive wherein you have offended in what you have done or left undone, whether in thought, word, or deed. And acknowledge your sins before Almighty God, with full purpose of amendment of life, being ready to make restitution for all injuries and wrongs done by you to others; and also being ready to forgive those who have offended you, in order that you yourselves may be forgiven. And then, being reconciled with one another, come to the banquet of that most heavenly Food. The Exhortation BCP p. 317*

*1 And let the presbyters also be compassionate, merciful to all, bringing back those that have wandered, caring for all the weak, neglecting neither widow nor orphan nor poor, but "ever providing for that which is good before God and man," refraining from all wrath, respect of persons, unjust judgment, being far from all love of money, not quickly believing evil of any, not hasty in judgment, knowing that "we all owe the debt of sin." 2 If then we pray the Lord to forgive us, we also ought to forgive, for we stand before the eyes of the Lord and of God, and "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, and each must give an account of himself." 3 So then "let us serve him with fear and all reverence," as he himself commanded us, and as did the*

*Apostles, who brought us the Gospel, and the Prophets who foretold the coming of our Lord. Let us be zealous for good, refraining from offense, and from the false brethren, and from those who bear the name of the Lord in hypocrisy, who deceive empty-minded men. - Polycarp to the Philippians*

## Reason

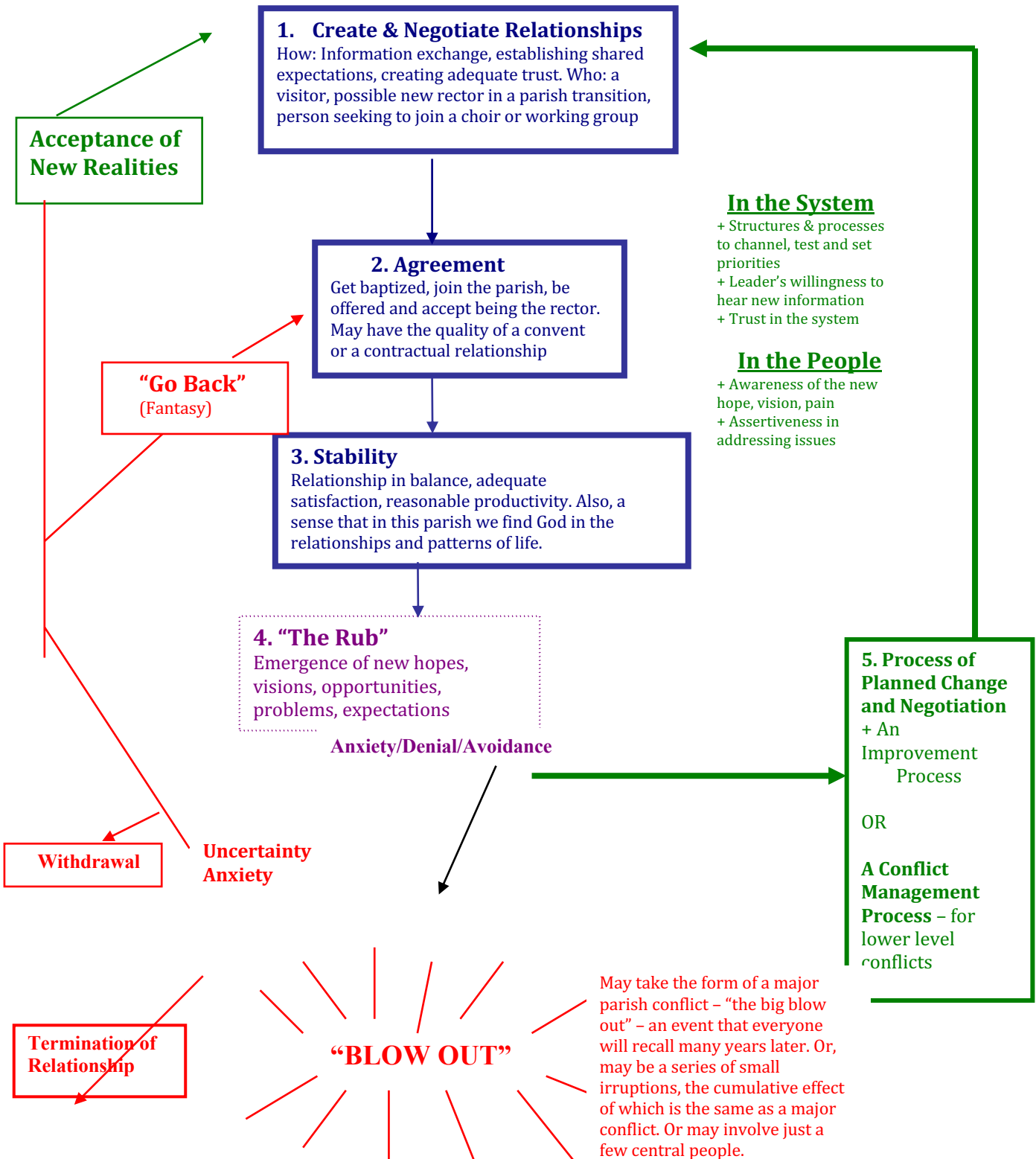
*Reason draws upon the totality of the church's and humanity's experience and understanding. In its interaction with scripture and tradition it both interprets them and at the same time is enlarged by them. Reason in this setting is more than rationality and logic. It also calls upon our empathy and imagination in sorting out and deciding on meaning, and on what is moral and what is to be done in a particular situation. Reason is a form of practical wisdom grounded in reality. Our willingness to learn from our experience is an expression of reason.*

Robert Gallagher, *Fill All Things: The Dynamics of Spirituality in the Parish Church*, pp. 64-65

For our purposes, this means making use of the understandings of organizational psychology and behavior about conflict management. There are two models that are especially useful: "The Relationship Cycle" and "Levels of Conflict."

After each model are a few ideas about how you might bring-things-together; shape a synthesis that takes into account all the elements in relationship to the particular context.

# RELATIONSHIP CYCLE IN PARISHES



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tion: A Norm-

## Bringing things together

Let's say that you are facing a parish conflict that is early-days and relatively low level. Say there are a married couple, new parishioners, who want more "upbeat hymns." You're the vicar; you have two concerns. First, "upbeat-hymns" in your experience are emotionally sloppy nonsense that encourage shallow sentimentality. (Not that you have strong feelings about any of this) and second, of the top of your heads you can name ten parishioners who will start using phrases like "happy-clappy."

Ask yourself a few questions to get a sense of what the "rub" is for these people and what emotions are engaged for you and them.

- What's your read on the couple asking? Are they likely to push the matter? Are there others in the congregation with the same views; in which case the issue could grow in numbers and intensity. Are the two people asking your wardens? There are pragmatic concerns you need to think about.
- If the matter seems important to the people asking – have you sat down and listened to them? Asked them a few questions about their previous church experience (in a respectful, curious way)?
- Reflect upon your own feelings. Are you experiencing anxiety, a desire to avoid this, behavior that suggests you are denying it as possibly important to the couple?

### General guidance

- It's low level stuff. Talk with them face-to-face. Do it shortly after they mention it. Use it as an opportunity to get to know them better. Maybe listen to them about the music concern; tell them you want to think about it; and ask them if you can interview them on their spiritual life as a way of getting to know them.
- This isn't a situation that needs forgiveness or witnesses.
- You want to keep their "rub" over on the green line side of things. Timely, face-to-face listening is likely to help that happen. This issue probably won't be seen by those involved as a conflict. The reason you need to see it in relationship to conflict dynamics and management is this – if you don't address it at this stage it may become more serious. And the more serious it becomes the more difficulty managing it.
- If the parish's "Agreement" (an unspoken psychological agreement) and its stability includes a certain type of music – you may want to share that with them. Avoid suggesting that this closes the conversation. But if it's a consideration in your mind – tell them.

## LEVELS OF CONFLICT

Based on Speed Leas, *Moving Your Church Through Conflict*

For it to be a system conflict a significant percentage of people, or people with significant influence, need to be upset with the practices/policies/style/person of the current leadership.

A task of leaders is to develop the organization's capacity to solve problems and manage the "rubs" that are a normal and useful part of organizational life. This allows the organization to be a more productive and satisfying environment while also heading off serious conflict. As part of its life an organization needs to be engaged in a developmental process of building trust, developing communication and negotiating skills, and establishing processes to manage concerns and new ideas. This gives people the ability to keep conflict at the lower levels. As conflict moves to higher levels people tend to resist skill development, elaborate problem solving methods, the introduction of new ground rules, etc. So, these things are best done when the organization is not in conflict.

LEVEL	SYMPTOMS	STRATEGY
<b>I PROBLEM TO SOLVE</b>	<p><b>Objective of those involved:</b> fix the problem</p> <p><b>Tone/behaviors:</b> optimistic, collaborative, problem not person focus, rational; language is clear, specific, here and now, adult; real differences over goals, values, needs, plans, information; people understand each other and disagree.</p>	<p>1. Facilitate decision making by <u>collaborative problem solving</u>, or if not possible, by <u>negotiation</u>, or if not possible, by <u>formal authority action</u> (by voting or leader decision.)</p> <p>2. <u>Methods</u> -- establish meeting norms, use a facilitator and a disciplined process, brainstorm and prioritize, use communication skills, etc.</p>
<b>II DISAGREEMENT</b>	<p><b>Objectives:</b> self protection, not getting hurt; solve the problem</p> <p><b>Tone/behaviors:</b> cautious, not hostile; general language to protect people and self, e.g., "there is no trust", "we need more openness"; hostile humor, distancing comments; withhold information that might serve the other side or damage your side.</p>	<p>1. <u>Reduce tension and facilitate people's work together</u> --the need here is to keep people close enough to work though their differences and not engage in withdrawal or begin to get aggressive. Encourage people to "hang in", attend and prepare for meetings; coach people to act, to be assertive, help people fully express their concerns and to listen to the concerns of others; provide ways to build relationships, ways for people to know each other as people, to speak with each other about common interests and needs.</p> <p>2. <u>Methods</u> -- role reversal, expectations clarification, paraphrase and itemized response, brainstorm and prioritize, use facilitator, etc.</p> <p>2. <u>Establish ground rules</u> -- get agreement about how we will work on the issue, e.g., no threats, identify sources of information, direct sharing of differences, no personal attacks, no withdrawing; norms for meetings, etc.</p> <p>3. <u>Make decisions</u> -- collaborative problem solving --- negotiation --- formal authority</p>

<p><b>III CONTEST</b></p>	<p><b>Objective:</b> win, not yet at level of wanting to hurt the opponent.  <b>Tone/behaviors:</b> win/lose dynamics, threatening, difficult, resistance to peace overtures, hanging back waiting for others to show weakness, personal attacks, emotional appeals, limited social contact; language is distorted - overgeneralized ("you always..", "everyone.."), exaggerated, making a case, expecting magic or rapid change, expecting others to read your mind, extreme, only two sides, lose the shade/gray.</p>	<p>The overall need is to reduce fear and distorted thinking; to provide a sense of order.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. All the strategies mentioned for Level II, as possible.</li> <li>2. <u>Structure the process</u> -- work out a clear process; dates of meetings, time lines, etc. Revise it as needed; but work at maintaining a sense of order and direction. There is a high need for a process that is seen as fair, open, and legal.</li> <li>3. <u>Use an external consultant</u></li> <li>4. <u>Contact between parties to the conflict needs to be carefully managed</u> -- opportunities for people to express feelings and clarify their interests need to be provided for each side; this usually needs to first be done apart from the other side; when they are ready to work together, then have a carefully facilitated meeting.</li> <li>5. <u>Decision making</u> -- the same sequence as at other levels; however, the more persuasion, compelling and voting the more likely that people will leave the organization.</li> </ol>
<p><b>IV FIGHT/FLIGHT</b></p>	<p><b>Objectives:</b> hurt/get rid of the others; being "right"  <b>Tone/behaviors:</b> factions inflexible, clear lines, strong leaders emerge; language becomes ideological - about principles, truth, rights; parties detached, causing each to lose sense of the pain they cause; attempt to enlist outsiders in the cause, parties will not speak with each other, self righteous, cold</p>	<p>More tension will require more structure.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <u>Use an external consultant/mediator</u> -- this can not be someone from the central office.</li> <li>2. <u>Follow the book</u> -- legal issues may be involved, trust is very low; follow the organization's standards.</li> <li>3. <u>Communicate through third parties</u> -- seek an agreement for third parties to serve as "go-betweens" to carry messages, look for possible areas of agreement, Most likely to be useful when the issue is clear.</li> <li>4. <u>Be tougher about the ground rules</u> -- enforce expectations about personal attacks, loaded language; might have a group that monitors agreements and gives feedback to violators.</li> <li>5. <u>Decision making</u> -- likely to be by formal authority. Some are likely to leave.</li> </ol>
<p><b>V INTRACTABLE SITUATION</b></p>	<p><b>Objective:</b> destroy the others  <b>Tone/behaviors:</b> attempts to do serious damage to the other's reputation, position, well being; attempts may continue after the parties have been separated</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The conflict is no longer manageable.</li> <li>- Outside authority will need to make difficult decisions.</li> <li>- The parties need to be separated.</li> <li>- Some people may need to be asked to leave.</li> </ul>



## Bringing things together

We'll use Speed Leas model to consider a higher-level conflict. Something that in the Relationship Cycle would be called a Blow Out.

First, let's consider how to assess the level. If one of the parties involved is at that level, that's the level of the conflict.

Second, once you see the level you need to set aside your judgements (at least for now.) Yes, people are behaving badly. What's needed isn't judgement about that behavior but encouragement to engage the processes that can move the relationship toward healing and reconciliation.

Third, unless action is taken to stabilize the level it is likely to continue to escalate. So, while we are far past not letting the sun go down on our anger, the need to move now in a timely, careful, yet urgent manner is still called for. Face-to face will require external assistance. The witnesses may need to be professionally trained consultants or mediators along with people from the congregation with a high level of emotional intelligence.

## For reflection

*Change means movement. Movement means friction. Only in the frictionless vacuum of a nonexistent abstract world can movement or change occur without that abrasive friction of conflict.* Saul Alinsky

*God's love is too great to be confined to any one side of a conflict.* Desmond Tutu