

**‘Transforming Conflict’ by Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd MacMillan for the
Foundation for Church Leadership**

Summary and Synopsis

Introduction

This project gathers conflict resolution strategies into a comprehensive training programme for senior church leaders. Many speak despairingly over current church conflicts, ‘Things could not get much worse!’ they say and despair that there is anything to be done. In response, we present an ambitiously designed project. Rather than offering resources for doing conflict a little better, we offer resources for *conflict transformation*, a structural shift that rearranges the various components of church conflict for not just survival, but spiritual growth.

Searching deep and wide through the literature, we researched conflict across several disciplines and developed the curriculum for a Conflict Transformation Course to be taught to senior church leaders.

Method

Invitations were sent to UK senior church leaders from six denominations at the level of bishop, archdeacon, canon or equivalent: Anglican, Baptist, Church of Scotland, Methodist, Roman Catholic, and United Reformed (see Appendix 1 for letter of invitation). We offered, free of charge, three training sessions, and organised them to take place in London, York, and Edinburgh, scheduled over four months, according to the diaries of each senior church leader. Our target was to involve 30 senior church leaders in the training and research side of this project. In all, 31 participants responded to our invitation to attend the three training days (between 10 am - 3 pm), and to be our research participants. The training days were non-consecutive, allowing time for homework assignments, and took place in groups of four to six participants each day, taught by Eolene Boyd-Macmillan and Sara Savage. In the end, two senior church leaders had to drop out mid-way through the course (after completing the questionnaires discussed in Part II), leaving us with an initial ‘graduating class’ of 29 senior leaders from the Anglican (13), Baptist (2), Church of Scotland (4), Methodist (6), Roman Catholic (2), and United Reformed Churches (2). 24 were male, and 5 were female.

The training material focuses on the special challenges of senior leaders in the church, covering physiology, inner conflicts, inter-personal differences, group dynamics, thinking patterns, worldview clashes, difficult people, and the unique helps and hindrances characteristic of faith communities. Many senior leaders, along with most Christians, will have been taught that ‘nice’ Christians do not get into conflicts, and they will not have considered their multi-layered reactions to conflict. Yet only after dissecting conflict into its many parts are we ready to use practical tools and strategies for conflict transformation. Even then, conflict transformation takes great effort and commitment; we need memory cues, group encouragement, and organisational support to transform church conflict. The good news is that the project is a success. Based on measurements and feedback from the participants themselves, senior church leaders (and the rest of us) can learn to embrace conflict in a way that nurtures spiritual growth. With this course we say, ‘Things can only get better!’

The Map: Ten Steps through Conflict Transformation

Step 1: Decide to embrace conflict as an essential motor for spiritual growth: counter-act norms of 'niceness' that perpetuate the myth that conflict is un-Christian.

Step 2: Understand the physiology of conflict: knowing the reactions of your body and emotions will enable you to diffuse the tension rather than perpetuate the conflict.

Step 3: Discover your conflict style: are you more concerned about the relationships or about the task/issue involved in the conflict?

Step 4: Separate the issues from the inter-personal difficulties in the conflict through these four questions:

- Is there disagreement over practicalities or vision?
- Is there disagreement over imperfection or disappointment?
- Is there disagreement over Christian worldview emphases?
- Is there a 'difficult' person involved?

Step 5: Examine the group dynamics within the conflict: are there destructive ingroup/ outgroup behaviours, such as ingroup promotion at the expense of the outgroup, stereo-typing, and blaming?

- Recognise the importance of worldview protection
- Use Enlightened Tit for Tat to establish rules for constructive interaction

Step 6: Deploy Active Listening techniques to listen to all sides, *especially* to those with whom you disagree most.

Step 7: Failure to identify the correct conflict level will worsen the conflict:

- Level 1: Problem
- Level 2: Disagreement
- Level 3: Contest
- Level 4: Battle
- Level 5: Mutual Destruction

Step 8: Diagram the conflict using the thinking strategy of Integrative Complexity (IC).

- Differentiate the problem facets and identify the underlying values
- Identify shared underlying values, explore trading less important values for more important values
- Integrate the most important underlying values into solutions agreeable to all

Step 9: For conflicts involving *irreconcilable* perspectives, follow a second thinking strategy, Relational and Contextual Reasoning (RCR)

- Gather information
- Generate all possible solutions
- Weed out tangential information and solutions
- Identify the appropriate context for each solution
- Identify any links among the solutions
- Identify any chronological or logical dependencies among the solutions
- Create an overarching theory or schema that accounts for all of the information and possible solutions
- Re-examine key concepts in the light of the overarching theory or schema

Step 10: Incorporate the unique resources of Christian spirituality and doctrine: see the conflict as the outworking of the ministry of Christ who not only provoked conflict with grace and love, but embodied the irreconcilable perspectives of divinity and humanity in his personhood.

- Take the first steps toward loving and forgiving your opponents.

The book is available only from The Foundation for Church Leadership, Unit 16 Sycamore Business park, Copt Hewick, Ripon HG4 5DF. 01765 609167.

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