

**In a congregation of similar members**, people may disagree about painting the church sanctuary, or the purchase of an organ or keyboard, or the times of worship, but there tends to be little disagreement about how meetings are run or how people communicate with one another. People generally share the same foundational values and the same patterns of communication. In fact, most congregations have developed their own culture of how to deal with conflict. Some have lengthy annual meetings with much heated discussion; some have short, harmonious meetings that affirm decisions of leadership. Some may have a history of major membership shifts or even beginning a new and separate congregation in times of visible, public conflict

A sizeable number of Lutheran congregations have grown out of a rural, European immigrant background that has helped to shape attitudes both toward outreach and evangelism to persons of different backgrounds and attitudes toward conflict. Immigrant congregations were places of safety for persons of common language and background. The primary focus was on ministering to persons within the congregation and teaching the next generation.

Rural communities thrive on sameness, harmony, and interdependence. Conflict certainly exists, but there is often little healthy social practice of dealing openly with conflict. The social fabric relies on being able to get along. People who don't fit the community mold frequently leave. Conflict may also be seen as something to strongly avoid since it can spin into violence when out of control. Congregations that were formed by immigrant rural people may still carry a cultural reluctance to openly embrace difference, change, and conflict

Congregations that share a racial, cultural heritage – whatever that heritage is – usually share ways of thinking, speaking, and relating together. The culture of communication and the ways of dealing with conflict are often invisible and simply exist as the way of life that is taken for granted.

When a congregation is taking the journey across race, culture, and class, the invisible ways of communication can become problematic when groups see and interpret the words and actions of another group from within their own lens. Issues of power and voice, of hearing and listening, of coming together to resolve concerns and needs take on another level of complexity when people communicate in different ways. Possibilities for conflict increase.

The reflection and discussion pieces in this section dig deeper into where and how the journey becomes more challenging as a congregation lives its way into a new authentic multicultural reality. Specific issues come and go, but issues of power, conflict, and communication are ongoing and need continual attention. Use the pieces in this section to strengthen the skills and understanding of the congregation for ongoing life together.

## CYCLE OF GOSPEL LIVING

### EMPTY TOMB RESURRECTION POWERFUL

-ENTRY POINT FOR THE POWERFUL

Give Up Power, Choose The Cross

### CROSS DEATH POWERLESS

-ENTRY POINT FOR THE POWERLESS

Empowerment Endurance

### EMPTY TOMB RESURRECTION POWERFUL

Eric Law provides background for understanding the meaning of the cycle. (Reprinted from Living the Gospel of Peace: Tools for Building More Inclusive Community. Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2004.)

## The Cycle of Gospel Living

For many years I observed that racial/ethnic/multicultural discussions would reach an impasse when the issue of power came up. "Multicultural ministry" in our church began to offer special ways in which people of color communities could meet. But for many reasons, it wasn't clear to many white members that ethnic caucusing was not meant to be an end in itself. It was meant to enhance ethnic community strengths so that we could take part more holistically in building a church for our children, a church that embraced all people and included sharing of power (white as well as people of color).

One of the best teaching tools I've ever seen about faith-based power and diversity comes from Episcopal priest Eric Law. For those who fear that we will lose power that we have, and for those who fear we will not gain power that we need, this chart illustrates how we are all living on the same cycle, but with different entry points! It is a vital and foundational message to understand and to share, as we travel on our journey across culture, race and class.

\* When dealing with inclusiveness, we have to consider who holds more power in a situation or institution. Because of power differentials, we create institutions that are not inclusive. In any given context, an institution might favor one group over another. These institutions then serve to perpetuate the differences in power that led to their creation. The ability to discern power differentiations is an essential skill needed to challenge an institution to be more inclusive because the challenge of inclusion is different for the powerful and the powerless.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God's attitude toward powerful and rich people is very different from God's attitude toward people who are powerless and poor. The powerful in society are challenged to give up their power and wealth and redistribute it in order to achieve equality among the people of God. The emphasis is on serving and being humble. God judges the powerful by their use of their power and privilege. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19:24).

The powerless, on the other hand, are lifted up, cared for, and loved by God. God has compassion for the oppressed and suffering. God loves them and will deliver them. The emphasis is on endurance and faithfulness. "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today. . . . The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still" (Exod. 14:13-14).

This difference in attitude toward the powerful and the powerless was clear throughout the ministry of Jesus. Jesus never told the poor and powerless to sell all they owned and give the proceeds to the poor. That would obviously be absurd. Jesus healed the poor, loved them, ate with them, touched them, comforted them, blessed them, served them, encouraged them, taught them, and liberated them by his own suffering, death, and resurrection. Finally, Jesus breathed on them, infusing them with the Holy Spirit's power to teach and heal in the name of God.

At the same time, Jesus did not tell the rich and powerful that they are blessed. Jesus warned them and challenged them to serve and to humble themselves. He reminded them of what the law and the prophets said and extended an invitation to relinquish power, take up the cross, and follow him.

(continued)

Jesus never asked the powerless to choose the cross because, by their condition of powerlessness, they were already on the cross. Because the powerless were already on the cross, they were called to endurance and faithfulness in the hope of God's deliverance through the resurrection.

In a given situation, it is crucial to determine where we are in relation to the cross. No one can stay on one side of the cross all the time. Living the gospel involves moving through the cycle of death and resurrection, the cross and the empty tomb, again and again. The moment we are resurrected into a new life of empowerment, we must begin to think about serving, giving away our power, and taking up the cross again. Failing to do so brings the chance of abusing our power. The moment we take up the cross and become powerless, we must begin to think about faithfulness and endurance and looking toward empowerment through the empty tomb. In this dynamic of death and resurrection, the cross and the empty tomb, Lent and Easter, the gospel comes to life in each of us. This is the Cycle of Gospel Living.

#### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- How do you see your congregation in relation to the Cycle of Gospel Living?
  - Who are the powerful? In what ways are they being called and challenged to give away their power?
  - Who are the powerless? In what ways are they being called to empowerment?
- What new understanding and insight does this cycle give you for the ongoing dynamics of living together as one body in Christ?

Continue to For Discussion: Dealing with the Hard Issues



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## Defining cross-cultural conflict: a small group activity

Learning to be specific about conflict is a first step toward managing it. This activity may uncover issues too large to act on right now. But it will build up relationships in your group as they hear of one another's concerns. And it will suggest a "map" of concerns which you can later look more closely into for action when the time is right.

Notes for leaders: Give each group member a slip of paper. Ask them to jot down—with just a few words or a phrase—one general example of a conflict across race, culture, or class in the United States. Afterwards, collect the slips and spread them out on a table for all to look at.

### Discuss the examples of conflict:

- Did you find it hard or easy to come up with an example? Why do you think that was?
- Do you notice any element/s that the responses have in common? What is it/what are they?
- What conflict(s) across race, culture or class do you think is (are) of major concern in your community, town or city? Why?
- In what ways do elements of cross-cultural conflict at the community or society level affect attitudes, behaviors, or ministries of the congregation?

### Where does conflict happen in church settings?

Within the church we may see one another as sisters and brothers in Christ. We may seek to share God's love and peace with those with whom we worship, or share a building, or meet in partnership. We may be surprised when we began those ministries with such good intentions and strong hopes for growth and now it is getting so hard.

- How do you or other established members of the congregation feel if newer people:
  - Use the church kitchen in a different way than you do?
  - Want worship styles that don't sound like music to your ears?
  - Seem to have different views on how children should behave in church?
  - Don't regularly volunteer when you need more hands to help?
  - See different priorities for your congregation's ministry (and spend time, energy and funds accordingly)?
- How do you interact with fellow Christians with whom you may share a building?
  - Who chooses the times for worship for each congregation?
  - What attitudes are expressed about the people and how the building is used?

- o Who is “owner”? Who is “visitor” or “guest”? What meaning do those words hold?
- How do you relate to members of another congregation with whom you are in partnership?
  - o What issues of race, culture, or class lie between the two congregations?
  - o Is one congregation seen as having greater power or more resources than the other?
  - o How are resources, assets, or gifts defined and used within the partnership?
  - o How do members of the congregations see one another?

As a leadership team, take time regularly to listen with care to how people are relating with one another and to hear voices of complaint, dissatisfaction, or pain and hurt. At this point, the people in leadership should reflect the diversity of the congregation. If the congregation worships in more than one language, equal numbers of each group should be represented in leadership. If two congregations share a building, equal numbers of each congregation should meet together to address issues of common concern. Congregations in partnership should jointly make all decisions of shared life and interaction. None of those steps will be easy or without challenge.

You have spent significant time shaping your vision, developing your commitment, and acting intentionally. You have spent time preparing—examining history, understanding cultural norms and values, and getting to know neighbors; and yet, in any setting where one group has originally been connected with the building, feelings and attitudes of ownership and greater power and decision-making, will be likely to arise.

The question is not, “How do we avoid conflict?” But, “How do we expect and embrace conflict and deal with the hard issues?”

Conflict here is healthy and vital for growth. Conflict across cultures is inevitable. But conflict when it is expected and embraced does not have to be a dualistic, “win/lose” conflict, but rather a recognition of differences, an invitation to learn from one another, and an openness to grow together into a new reality. Avoidance of conflict can mean a superficial peace in which those in power discount the voices of the less powerful and pretend things are OK, and those who are less powerful go along because it feels futile to speak up or they’re encouraged not to make waves.

As a congregation, you are creating a new culture that welcomes and embraces difference. Vision and leadership continue to be central to creating that new culture. Continual listening and assessment will help keep a pulse on the ability of people to seriously engage with one another.

- What reactions do you notice in the congregation when issues of disagreement arise?
  - o To whom do people take their complaints, resistance, hurt, or pain?
  - o What evidence do you see of old patterns of communication? What evidence of new patterns?
- Identify current issues of disagreement or conflict in the congregation, or name potential areas of disagreement as you look ahead.

- o What are the differing viewpoints that have been expressed on each of those issues?
- o In what settings and in what ways are those viewpoints expressed and heard?
- o What settings encourage all voices to be heard in an open and honest dialogue?
- o Once heard, how are those issues and differing viewpoints addressed?

None of the situations named earlier come with easy answers. What's important is **HOW** we address the conflicts. What process/structure will you employ to manage conflict internally, so that those involved can:

- be informed of the issue at hand
- get to know and trust each other, so that you can work toward solutions together
- reinforce shared participation in dialogue so that each person's voice can be heard
- share equally in decision making

A community of faith, such as a congregation, is an excellent place for practicing the management of conflict. God doesn't expect us to emerge full-blown and knowledgeable in things that are this important. Instead, when we step forward in willingness to learn, God blesses us with opportunities to grow and serve as peacemakers.

Continue to For Discussion: Building a culture of open Communication



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*You can be  
the music cue  
to bridge the silence  
and lead the way  
to harmony.*

Imagine you've placed a phone call to an organization. You've gotten through the automated menu, and have been told, "Your call is important to us, and will be answered by the next available representative." Then suddenly, you're cut off into silence...followed by more silence... How long do you wait until you hang up? Wouldn't it have helped to hear music as a cue that you were still connected? Or even a straightforward announcement that you would hear silence, but it would be followed by a response?

People need to know that they are being heard, which is akin to being seen and respected. In intercultural communication, it's a reality that differences can lead to conflict, especially when people feel they are not being heard (seen and respected). But that can never be the final word for Christians. Even while expecting conflict, how shall we address it, or build a culture which hears and thrives on differences? Your involvement, your communication, your intentional care can combine to make you the music cue that bridges the silences, and leads the way to harmony.

- Ground Rules for Communication

One good place to start is to practice creating ground rules for communication. For excellent guidelines on this, see the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s booklet, "Living the Vision: Becoming a Multicultural Church," chapter 4 (pages 51-62). See Additional Resources for online ordering information, or access the resource as a pdf document and read and print from the website <http://covnetpres.org/2016/02/becoming-a-multicultural-church/>.

Chapter 4 "Creating New Ground Rules for Communication" emphasizes differing ground rules for different settings in the congregation. It presents ground rules for 1) gatherings of the whole congregation; 2) small group gatherings in the congregation; and 3) interpersonal relationships.

The information in these pages provides a strong basis for building a culture of inclusion in all settings in which people interact. Print out, discuss, use, adapt, create post-ers, and continually revisit these guidelines for communication. Find ways to display your own ground rules for communication that are highly visible and serve as constant reminders in places where the congregation gathers as a whole and where people meet in small groups or talk interpersonally.

As you read this chapter, why not read the entire booklet? It's a gift of a resource—so clearly and compactly written. We highly recommend it to all.

### **Communication through words: a discussion**

Communication is a great gift of God. Remember the story of Helen Keller, unable to speak or to hear—then realizing when her teacher pumped water over her hands, that “water” had a meaning. That words had meaning, and could connect her with the rest of the world. That was powerful! We who are sightless and unable to speak in our own way across boundaries are also freed by God’s waters of life. Just as Helen Keller was so excited to learn one word after another, as fast as she could, how wondrous it can be for us too, to ask God our Teacher to show us the words, the way to communicate with others.

In a small group, share an instance in your life, or a brief story you’ve heard, when good communication crossed a barrier of race, culture or class.

- What was the situation?
- What did the good communication achieve?
- From this example, what makes for “good communication”?
- What inhibits good communication from happening across race, culture or class?

### **Communication without words: a reflection time**

In a small group, recall when something meaningful was communicated nonverbally.

- Give an example of nonverbal communication that was meaningful in a setting familiar to you. (E.g. at a party, a spouse lifts an eyebrow to his/her spouse to say “Are you ready to go home now?”)
- Give an example of nonverbal communication that you did not understand in a setting familiar or unfamiliar to you
- Share an example of nonverbal communication that you did not like (E.g. a group at a bowling alley that leaves without cleaning up their leftover food and trash; fellow driver/commuter cuts you off, pushes by without apology.) What message did you receive (whether they intended to send it or not)? In keeping with the saying, we can’t change others, but we can change ourselves, how can we encourage in our own circles the growth of greater courtesy and civility with others?

### **Communication as a person of faith: for discussion**

- What are some ways in which people of faith can send good nonverbal communications together across race, culture and class? (E.g. partnership and joint activities with a congregation of color; financial gifts to support ministries/leaders across race, culture and class, etc.)
- Give an example of how a message (verbal or nonverbal) can relieve tensions across race, culture or class.
- What examples or signs of positive communication across race, culture, or class do you see within your congregation?
- What challenges to good communication do you see within your congregation?
- What small step do you think God is calling you to take this week to improve in good communication across cultures?

Remember: good communication can avert a lot of conflict!

Good communication can also lead to friendships that defy tensions across barriers. When the Los Angeles Uprisings happened, for example, rumors spread throughout the country of impending race violence and shootings. The rumors later proved unfounded. What if you had a friend to call, to ask what the real story was? Connectedness across race and culture can lead to a “one body, many members” community outside the church as well as within.

- What role is ours in the journey of diversity, to help such alliances to be built?

Continue to Group Activities: Exercises to Identify and talk through conflict



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Write: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America | 8765 West Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631-4101

**Timeframe needed:**

25-30 minutes for story portion

20-25 minutes for pyramid analysis and connection to stories

**Notes for leaders:**

Divide the large group into smaller groups of a few persons each. Within the small groups, each person is invited to briefly share their own experience or one they've heard in which there was conflict and in which the conflicting person was turned into a friend, or at least turned into a neighbor with whom differences were worked out. Offer participants the following questions to ponder. If there is time afterwards, ask for brief comments/feedback.

**Identifying the level of conflict: a small group study**

This study builds general awareness and knowledge useful for identifying the issues involved in a conflict. It can be a helpful exercise in identifying the layers of conflict using a "neutral" story. Skills from this exercise can transfer to identifying layers of conflict and talking at the deeper level on an issue within the congregation.

- What was the conflict? What was involved – misunderstanding, miscommunication, lack of information, or deeper issues of differing viewpoints and values?
- How was the conflict resolved?
- What elements made the difference in turning the situation around?
- Review the cultural "What, How, Why" pyramid in "Layers of Culture." If needed, again distribute copies. Point out that conflict may happen at all levels – in what we see and hear, in how we do things, and in what we believe and see as norms and standards. Conflicts over music, art, or symbols at the top level may be a conflict that reaches down into the "how" or "why" levels. Dialogue at a deeper level builds a stronger relationship and deeper understanding.

- For each story shared, identify the level at which the conflict was occurring.
- Consider what deeper cultural or values clash might have been involved.

**Using media to hone awareness**

Watching films together and discussing them immediately afterward is a great way to develop awareness on issues of race, culture and class. Use current and past movies to examine cross-cultural interactions, stereotypes, and whose viewpoints are presented.

For example, arrange for a group screening of "Crash," the Academy Award Winner for Best Picture 2006. After viewing, ask participants:

- What did you think as you watched? How did you feel?
- Were there persons and/or situations you identified with? How and why?
- What did you notice specifically about:
  - signs of power and positions of dominance
  - actions and interactions of persons who did not hold power

- cultural barriers to understanding among people
- causes and reasons for the “crashes” among the people

For a full-length review and more study questions, see <http://www.christianitytoday.com/movies/reviews/crash.html>

### **Using creative presentation to invite participants to study**

Now and then, we need refreshing invitations to come and learn together at church! Here’s a quick and memorable way to invite your members to join an OBMM study session on managing conflict. Ask your pastor for an appropriate time to present this.

In advance, seek out three church members who enjoy acting/theater arts. All four of you come to the front of the sanctuary. The leader reads the following “poem” while the three “sisters” act out what is said. Use your creativity for clothing, mime, expression. Follow up by briefly inviting the congregation to your OBMM study.

Notes for the actors: Each sister is a superheroine, bright-eyed and strong. One looks ready to handle anything. One is in “action figure” mode (clearing away jagged thunderbolts of conflict, perhaps. How will you portray “conflict” visually?). The third pushes/blows a cloud-shaped conflict away so that it gently drifts off into nothingness.

### **The Three Sisters**

#### **A temple talk invitation to OBMM study**

##### **Leader/reader:**

We speak of expecting conflict

so it won’t catch us by surprise

We speak of addressing conflict

in hopes of shaping it

before it shapes us

Let’s not forget our third “sister,”

the quiet one we might not notice at first

She can really make us smile!

Her name is Prevention.

Come to our next study session for “One Body, Many Members.” It’s about how to improve communication skills and manage conflict. Let’s see what we can learn together from “the three sisters” and build up some of their strength for ministry!

Going Deeper Completed - Continue to Living Cross-Culturally



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