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# Conflict Transformation: Living the Covenant

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**UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**  
OF ARLINGTON VIRGINIA

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A Place to Connect, Grow and Serve

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# Assumptions

- Conflict is a neutral and natural part of life.
  - Conflict exists because of the inevitable differences between us.
  - Our awareness of the depth of conflict grows with our discomfort.
  - Pain in conflict comes when we resist the learning or don't see a way toward it.
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# Goals

- To better understand the cycles of conflict in congregational life
  - To better understand our individual role
  - To gain common skills and language for addressing issues with one another
  - To empower ourselves and others to grow in courage to face problematic issues
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# “Speak the Truth in Love”

## Covenant for Working Together

### ■ Speaking

- We will speak for ourselves and not for others

### ■ the “Truth”

- We will speak only of our own experience
- We will speak as factually as possible

### ■ in Love

- We will speak honestly, with respect, and listen to understand
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# Balance

- “I” – Who am I? What do I need? What can I ask for? How am I responsible? How should I respond? What are my patterns?
  - “We” - How do we stay connected? How do we challenge one another? How do we disagree? Who are we in conflict?
  - “Larger Vision” – How do we reconcile our differences to serve a larger vision?
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# Reflection

Think of a time:

- When there was a conflict in your family of origin
  - When you experienced a conflict that was unresolved
  - When you experienced a conflict that took you to a new understanding.
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# What Happens to our Brain?

- Amygdala – purpose is to scan for danger
    - 3 responses: fight, flight or freeze (or tend, befriend or defend)
    - Yes or no capacity
    - Quick, not accurate
    - No sense of time
    - Relies on generalizations & stereotypes
    - Lose proportion
    - Imaginative gridlock
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# What Happens to our Brain

- Mammalian parts of the brain
    - Necessity of community
    - Social needs & social constraints
  - Prefrontal Cortex
    - Provides hindsight, insight and foresight
    - Allows us to see beyond ourselves & be self-reflective
    - Evoke imagination
    - Regulate emotions
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# Exercise

Remember a conflict that felt unresolved to you.

- What did it feel like in your body?
  - What did you think the other person was thinking?
  - What was your strategy for getting through it?
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# Self-differentiation

Is the capacity to be self-defining and in relationship.

Awareness of self = self-defining

- Boundaries: What is “mine” and what is “theirs”?
- I can only change myself.
- What are my values?

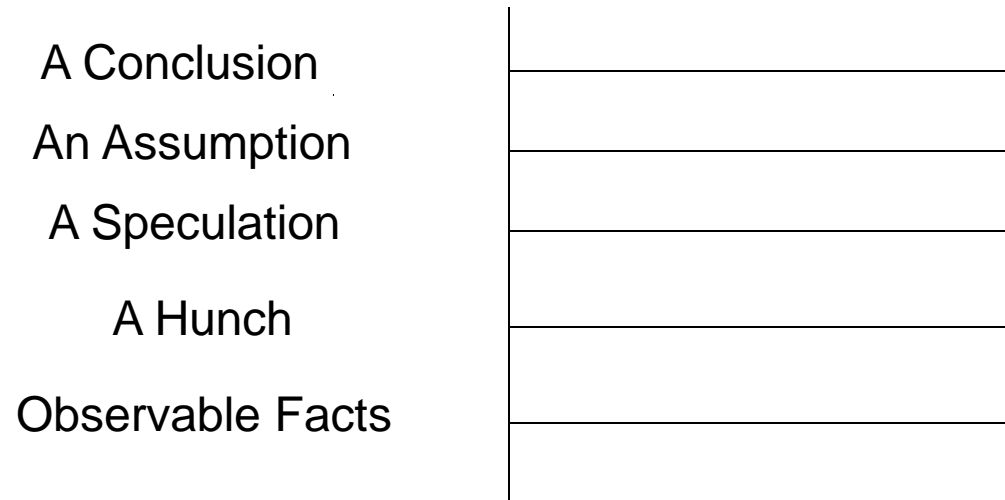
Commitment to others: ability to stay in relationship

- Relating as unique individuals as opposed to “merged”
  - Patterns of communication are respectful and curious
  - Capacity to “stay the course”, follow through
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# The Ladder of Inference

## “Climbing the Ladder”



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# Deep Listening

- Listen to understand,  
not to prepare a response.
  - Listening to understand does not require agreement.
  - Concentrate on the other person's thoughts and feelings, not your own.
  - Activate your holy curiosity about this person's interests.
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# Exercise

Take turns describing your unresolved conflict to a partner.

Each of you listen deeply and repeat back what you heard.

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# Interests vs. Positions

- Interests are the needs, desires, concerns and fears that motivate us.
  - An interest motivates a decision.
  - Interests allow for connection.
  - Positions are decisions you have made.
  - Positions polarize.
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# Balance of Inquiry & Advocacy

- Good reflective listening creates a space for respectful inquiry
  - Effective advocacy is built upon the values and interests you hear in inquiry
  - Advocacy without inquiry creates defensiveness
  - Inquiry without advocacy lacks leadership
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# Exercise

Break into triads

One describes to another an issue you care deeply about and try to invoke interests and values.

The third listens for when positions and advocacy might have gotten in the way.

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# Systemic Anxiety

- Lack of appropriate boundaries
  - Scapegoating
  - Stuckness – repetition of problem
  - Focus on the “fix” rather than the emotional system
  - Inhibition of leadership
  - Lack of imagination or creativity
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# Developing Capacity

- Capacity to See
  - Capacity to Integrate
  - Capacity to Engage Dilemmas
  - Capacity to Make Complexity a Friend
  - Capacity to Hear and Engage Voices
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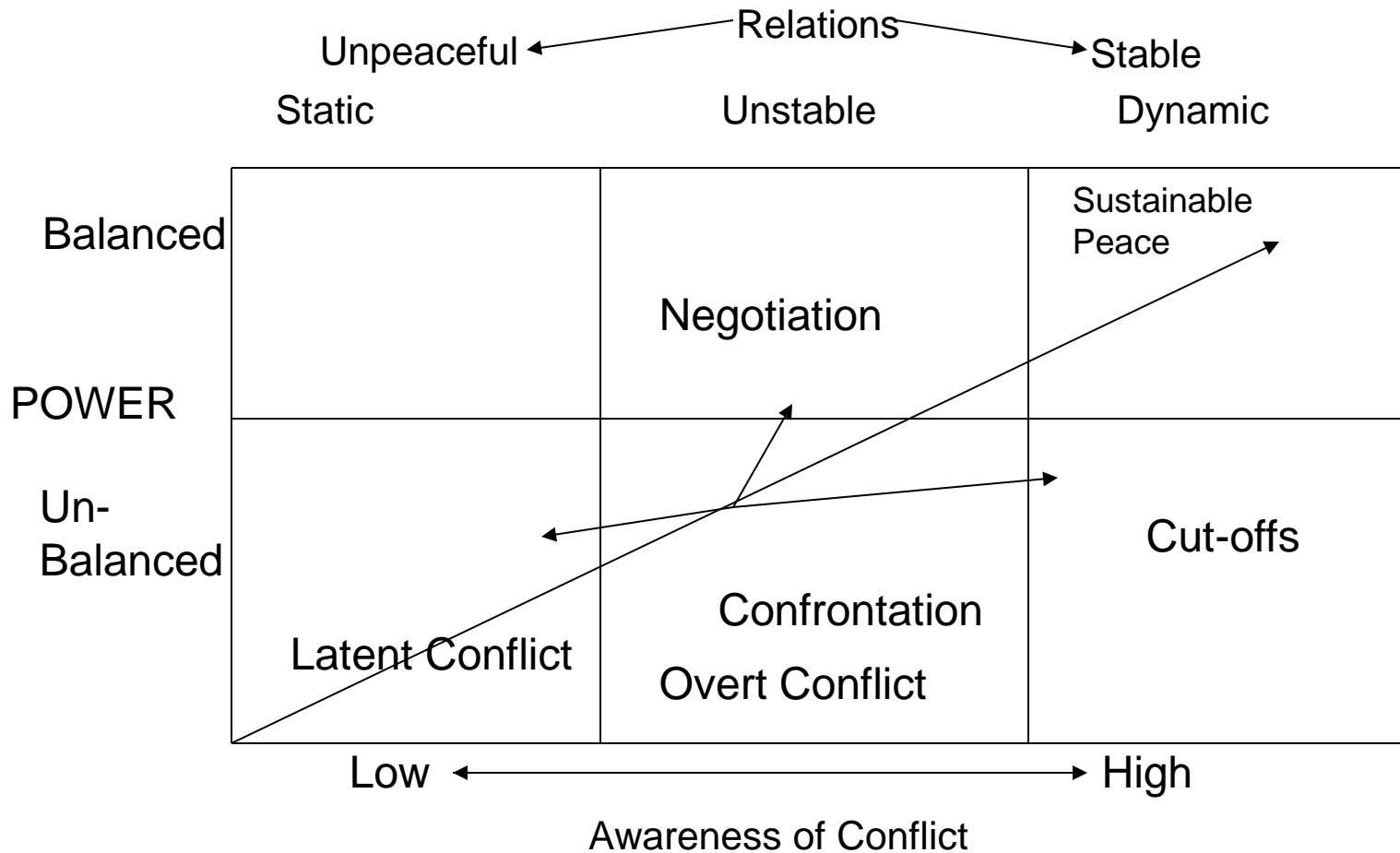
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# Triangles

- ❑ Good triangles: distribute anxiety; natural human phenomena. Community is a system of interlocking triangles.
  - ❑ Unhealthy triangles: attempt to shift responsibility for a fix to someone who is not involved.
    - “Secrets”, gossip, blaming, etc.
    - Patterns of “stuckness”
    - Not necessarily about the person but the system
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# Congregational Dynamics

## The Curle Diagram



# Congregational Dynamics

- **Lowering Anxiety**
  - Covenantal dialogue rather than discussion
  - Create time and space
  - Collect broad information
- **Builds Skills & Community**
  - Help people listen first
  - Connections are found beneath disagreements
  - Learn to question assumptions

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# Exercise

In groups of 3, discuss a time in the life of the church that fits somewhere on this chart.

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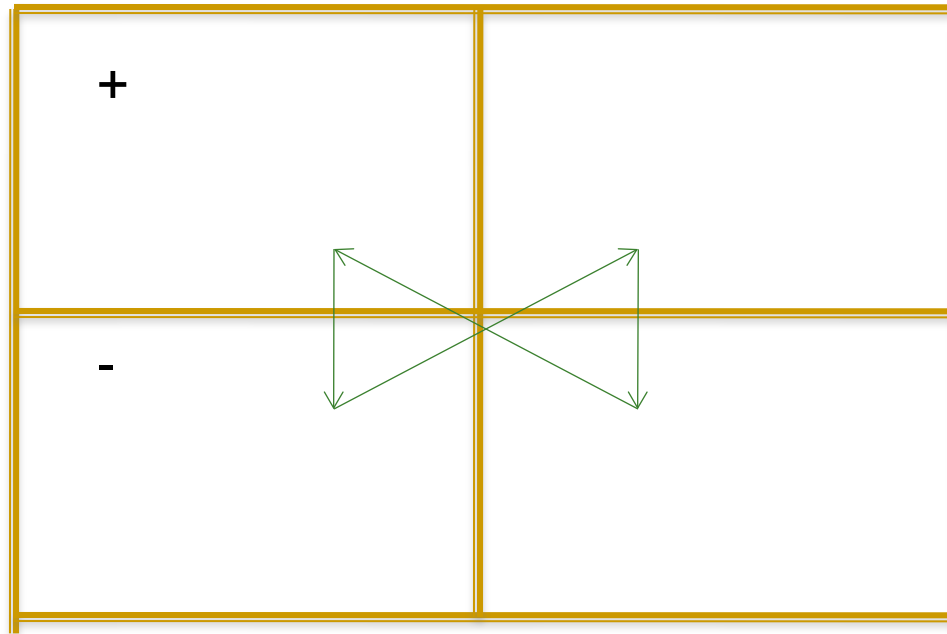
# Congregational Dynamics

What doesn't work to reduce anxiety and nurture a sense of covenantal community.

- ❑ “Confidential” surveys or questionnaires
  - ❑ Large public “congregational” meetings
  - ❑ A “hearing”
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# Polarity Management

Individual



+ Community

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# Listening Circles

- Dialogue not Debate
  - Facilitated by trained facilitators
  - Designed to surface issues
  - Solutions must come after listening
  - Builds community
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# Rules for Listening Circles

- Begin with Covenant
  - Confidentiality
  - Transparency of raised issues
  - No “cross-talk”
  - No interruptions
  - Questions that are evocative, not predictive
  - Responses are paraphrased
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# Purpose of the Church

- What is the work?
  - Who do we serve
  - Why is it important
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# Resources

- Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*. Seabury Books, 2007.
  - Ron Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, Marty Linski, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, Harvard Business School Press, 2009.
  - Barry Johnson, *Polarity Management*, HRD Press, 1996
  - John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, Good Books, 1969.
  - Robert Kegan & Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, Harvard Business School Press, 2009.
  - Gil Rendle, *The Happiness Trap*, Alban Institute online article.
  - Peter Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, Alban, 2006.
  - William Ury, *The Power of a Positive No*, Bantam, 2007.
  - “*The Art and Architecture of Powerful Questions*” Eric Vogt, online PDF.
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