



**Wisconsin Conference
United Church of Christ**

Understanding Conflict Progression

By Beth Voigt, Wisconsin Conference Conflict Transformation Team

Our beloved beagle mix died last fall at 17 years of age. It was the first time in twenty years I had been without a dog in the house. And...it was nice! We could leave the garage door open without fear of the dog hurtling through to terrorize the neighbor. No more late night trips to the 24 hour grocery store because we had (again) left dog food off the shopping list. Of course, we missed the companionship but I was in no hurry to add a canine member back into the pack. Until the pandemic hit. We were cooped up together, three teens distance learning, and... surfing the rescue dog websites. So now we have a young shelter dog, who has an abundance of energy and unwelcome behaviors.

This may seem a strange way to start an article about conflict, power, control and competing values in congregations, but what we are learning from working with our dog has much in common with how conflict escalates in church! This time of sheltering in place and uncertainty has shifted how faith communities gather, worship, and make decisions. It has also altered the way essential communication needs to occur. Most of us are not meeting in person and email and Zoom can leave important nuance out of our conversations.

As a member of the Conference Conflict Transformation Team, I wish to share both my experience with the landscape of conflict and how escalation occurs when a simple problem becomes a reflection of deeper systemic imbalance. Much of my thoughts are informed by material shared by Richard Blackburn of the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center, and my dog, Annie.

Every moment of every day individuals and organizations are faced with problems to solve. Our congregations are no different. Who edits the newsletter and bulletin? Who will be videotaping this week's worship service? How do we maintain contact with our elders staying safe at home? Whose job is it to do any of these things? When tasks arise and the process is in question, congregations can enter a level one stage of tension. When my dog sees another dog walking toward us on the street, her back stiffens and ears perk up and she is super focused on that approaching dog. To prevent an intensifying of stress, pastors and leadership have tools at their disposal: identifying and focusing on the specific problem, using language that is specific and clear can clarify the nature of unrest. While there may be some discomfort, participants are able to set aside discontent or anger to find a solution and open themselves to solutions that may not have occurred outside of a collaborative process. Timing is everything in level one. When we see that dog a block away, we have lots of choice. We can cross the street. We can step to the side and offer our dog a treat as a distraction. We can turn and go back the way we came. I can place my hand on my dog's back and physically release her tension with gentle pressure. Addressing conflict in its infancy offers choice.

However, we do not always have the luxury in the church of knowing about discontent before the simmer begins. So conflict can move into a level two environment of disagreement. Participants are invested in maintaining an image or self-protection (it is ALWAYS the responsibility of the pastor to call on the elders - that is how beloved Pastor Smith did things when this congregation was growing). Language can tend toward generalizations and communication begins to feel more emotional and personal and perhaps blame takes hold (I no longer come to church because the pastor did not visit me before my surgery last month). The dog we crossed the street to avoid has also crossed the street and now we are yards away and my dog is growling and pulling at the leash. What to do? Well there are still options in level two. Share activities to reduce the tension; encourage participation; develop a safe environment for sharing feelings and building trust. Focus on unity and collaborative problem solving or compromise if collaboration is not possible. Perhaps a shared model of pastoral care that is both lay and clergy supported can be developed. Perhaps I can call out to the other dog walker and ask them if they could have their dog sit while we walk on by.

Increasingly and enhanced in this time of pandemic, some leaders and pastors in congregations are just not aware of conflict until it reaches a level three stage. While we may not be literally having our parking lot conversations, they are occurring. Groups are forming and rooting themselves in a position. Overgeneralization is happening (the pastor does not want in-person church because it means they can sleep in on Sunday). Personal attacks increase and are substituted for identifying problems. Conversations are awkward, feelings not expressed. Our inability to be together in person does increase this distancing. Social media has become the forum for airing grievances. What might a congregation do once choice has become so limited in level three? Often it is helpful at this point to seek an outside neutral party to help mediate. Encouraging and expecting ground rules for communication and helping each party identify how they contribute to the problem may yet be possible. Clarify the difference between assumptions and reality (the pastor is not shirking their responsibilities - in fact these are the extra steps necessary every week to create the worship video for the congregation - perhaps you could help?). The other walker is not willing to stop, cross the street or move aside and my dog is jumping and snapping at me in her distress. Perhaps I need to consult with a dog trainer as the best way to support my dog before reaching this level of franticness.

The final two stages - four and five - can feel hopeless and without any recourse. In stage four, the conflict has escalated enough that people either jump in the brawl or decide to leave the arena altogether. Participants work to break relationships by leaving or getting someone else to leave. Efforts are made to hurt, weaken, punish, or humiliate the other. Attempts to defeat are more important than solving the problem. Attempts are made to expel the other from the group. In this case, third-party intervention/mediation is most definitely recommended. It will be important to utilize all the relationship and communication strategies from previous stages while also acknowledging the risk and fall-out from maintaining conflict. By this point, my dog has either fled the scene and run back up the street full of fear, or she has jumped the other dog and initiated a bite.

Stage five is the highest level of escalation. The conflict and parties involved have achieved intractability. The participants seem bent on destroying the other. The initial problem has been lost and there is no clear understanding of the issue. Participants perceive themselves as part of an eternal cause, fighting for principles. The ends justify the means - ideology over all else. In this case intervention requires outside authority to intervene; removal of decision-making authority from conflict leaders; use of peace-making authority; removal of disruptive parties to another environment. There are no more choices and judicatory bodies become involved.

Understanding the progression of conflict and the intensifying of positions and factions can be helpful in recognition of the importance of addressing stresses and problems while a multitude of options

exist. In the case of our dog, looking down the street and making some decisions about what we see in the landscape before we set off on our walk helps us support a balanced and reasonable dog.

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