

Dear Pastors and church leaders,

Greetings from the Conflict Transformation team of the Wisconsin Conference of the UCC!

Due to the Coronavirus, our culture experienced an extremely swift change in what 'typical' life looked like. In addition to changing daily routines and interrupting income for many it has thrown us emotional challenges like most have never experienced. While we continue to navigate our changed daily life, we cannot even latch on to a vision of a future that will feel familiar. How do we make sense of this experience and prepare ourselves for the future?

In looking back at your reactions to the changes in the past 2-3 months, you may realize that you have moved through the stages of grief:

- *Shock*: being told to stay home, teach your children at home, pay your bills with no or decreased income & favorite pastimes are not available (movies, sporting events and social gatherings)
- *Anger*: How do I manage this? Can someone really make me stay home? Has God abandoned us? When can we just get back to "normal"?
- *Bargaining*: If we all wear masks, will everything be OK?
- *Sadness*: I miss my friends, my church, my grandkids, my coffee shop.... My life has no meaning when I can't go to work or can't volunteer. I have a home and family—why isn't that satisfying right now?

Eventually we move beyond the consuming nature of our grief response and seek "what now?" When things feel out of control, many people seek to take control. That has the potential for wonderful new opportunities or for control that satisfies the needs of one and not the many.

When we apply this to our local church congregations - members have been through the stages of grief regarding in-person worship, fellowship and the hands-on work of the church. As health protective recommendations are made for the post 'Safer-at Home' time congregational leaders and members ask "What now?"

- For congregations that come together and are open to the new possibilities they never would have thought of *pre-virus*, an inspiring time of new discovery can unfold.
- For congregations who have been stretched beyond the fragile bonds that held them together before the virus, the tensions may be immense. Finances can easily be a source of conflict within a congregation. Who gets to make decisions is another source of conflict. Entitlement to have one's say because they are a contributing member of the congregation also creates conflict.

The Conflict Transformation Team offers the following suggestions for congregations:

- Acknowledge that many emotions play into next decisions and not all members of the congregation will be of like mind.

- Referencing individual and /or Biblical struggles that were navigated successfully. “Success” may look different than what the individual would have defined initially; e.g. “we may have a new normal that is different”. Recalling successful navigation of a previous situation can decrease anxiety and reinforce resilience in the current situation.
- Identify sources of support for individuals. For churches, identify that as a community - you will continue to navigate this situation.
- Be prepared for conflict within the membership. Just as in the larger community some advocate for a return to typical because ‘the health consequences weren’t that bad’. Others advocate for protecting people’s health. Expect that members of the congregation will be divided with similar perspectives.

These are some initial suggestions for you. In the coming weeks we will follow-up with additional articles related to areas we expect could be sources of conflict with suggestions that should help both you and your church as you move through this time of swift change:

- *A Pandemic of Grief: Interaction and Dynamics*
- *Competing Values, Conflict, Power and Control: Symptoms and Types*
- *Communication, Brainstorming and Discernment: Opportunities from Crisis*

If conflict is looming for you or your congregation and you would like to engage members of the Conflict Transformation team, please contact the Associate Conference Minister for your association. The services the team can provide can be designed to meet your needs. They can include: consultation with leadership in developing strategies for dealing with competing needs and values, being a listening ear to help analyze dynamics, or even provide remote facilitation of a decision-making process.

Grace and peace to you -

Conflict Transformation Team