

# Constructive Conflict in Ecumenical Contexts

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## The purpose and goals of this project

The purpose of these guidelines is to enable Christians to reflect together on ways in which they can address more constructively the issues which divide them. To the degree that we improve our ability to heal the divisions which separate Christians, we may be more effective reconcilers in the global community.

In the pursuit of truth and justice we sometimes must take a stand. Yet all too often we are uncomfortable with voicing our differences to those with whom we disagree; or we do not know how to do so in a constructive way. Sometimes we find ourselves behaving in ways which exacerbate controversies and accumulate bitter memories.

Conflicts are part of the human condition. They certainly seem to be part of the life of churches. So the question we must face is not **whether** we will disagree from time to time, but **how** we can do so with reconciling aims. This is a particular challenge for the ecumenical movement, which has as major goals the achievement of Christian unity and the promotion of human community. If ecumenical bodies do not address the issues which divide Christians, we are not doing our job properly!

Sometimes religious differences become entangled with worldly conflicts and cause enormous suffering. Some of the world's bitter battles are fueled by religious zeal. Closer to home, racial and ethnic tensions again have brought into stark focus how divided American society remains. In Massachusetts, two workers at an abortion clinic were killed in 1994 by a zealous opponent.

Within and among our churches, we disagree about public policy issues such as prayer in public schools, matters of human sexuality, and public funding of private and parochial schools. Our understandings of worship and ministry differ, keeping some of us from coming to the same eucharistic table together. So circumstances compel us to face the reality of conflict and find ways to make it non-combative, constructive, and where possible, reconciling.

Anyone who has spent even a little time in the ecumenical arena has heard or experienced "horror stories". They are tales of ignorance and insensitivity, anger and pain. They often involve individuals who intend to promote ecumenical cooperation, but instead endanger it by their choice of words, unnecessary silence, body language or behavior. Their comments

may be fueled by prejudice or misunderstanding. The Papal Encyclical on ecumenism, "Ut Unum Sint," identifies these issues as follows:

"There is an increased sense of the need for repentance, an awareness of certain refusals to forgive, of a certain pride, of an unevangelical insistence on condemning the 'other side', of a disdain born of an unhealthy presumption." (par.15)

Some problems are created by using an inappropriate context to air a grievance, or by a reluctance to engage in dialogue about genuine and legitimate divisions. For example, a Catholic participant in a dialogue feels compelled to say something about the morality of abortion just as a meeting ends and all depart. Protestant colleagues seethe and mutter their frustration among themselves, but lack the opportunity (or the courage?) to speak directly of their anger and hurt. Another example of an unproductive encounter is of a Protestant figure who relishes his/her church's diversity and open-mindedness, and loves to flaunt it in the face of colleagues whose churches may seem to be less so. Or an individual (pick any denomination!) focuses on the alleged failings of a personality rather than discussing the divisive issue at hand. And all too often, caricatures and hearsay replace nuance and accuracy in denominational debates. The latter takes too long.

Another source of ecumenical difficulties is born of a denomination or congregation's relative size. On the one hand, small churches in a given geographical area easily can be intimidated or ignored by the larger, and the large unwittingly can bully the smaller. They find it painful to participate in an ecumenical dialogue and know that they are over-looked or looked down upon because they are considered numerically insignificant. They are expected "to go along for the ride" if the larger churches set the agenda. On the other hand, small sects also may believe that they alone are "the chosen few."

The ecumenical movement demands a genuine candor coupled with Christian charity so that ideas and feelings can be exchanged freely; disagreements can be voiced without fear of intimidation; and we can come to know one another more deeply within the framework of the fullness of the Christian Tradition which has formed us all.

Ecumenism is a quest for unity in truth and holiness. It involves more than public politeness, more than friendship. It includes relationships between churches and the Christians who are a part of them. It insists that we come to understand and appreciate the distinctive graces which are within Protestantism, Orthodoxy and Catholicism. It does not demand that we abandon or dilute our own tradition to settle for an understanding of the nature of church which reduces everything to the least common denominator. But it does mean that in the perspective of most churches no one church has a monopoly on all holiness, grace, and truth.

Not only individuals, but also institutions are frail. Each church has its internal divisions, its peculiar weaknesses, its vulnerable times. Christian charity, however, never capitalizes on these frailties or uses them as weapons for ecclesiastical combat.

## **Applicability**

These guidelines may be applicable in a variety of situations, but we especially had in mind ecumenical environments. This project was initiated by a council of churches, because we are keenly aware of the need for conciliar bodies to facilitate dialogue about disagreements.

And we know from first-hand experiences what a challenge it can be to help this happen regularly and successfully!

Some other ecumenical environments which might use the guidelines include ecumenical associations and institutes, ministerial gatherings, official church dialogues, meetings of denominational leaders, and covenantal relationships between congregations (for example, where several churches are using the same space for worship or common service) - in other words, wherever Christian communities come into contact with each other. These encounters may be occasional or regular; formal or informal; involve a few individuals or large groups; address a time-specific situation or a sustained disagreement.

The participants in our Working Group met monthly over the course of a year. We found ourselves drawn deeply into the subject and appreciated the diverse gifts and perspectives of the participants. We quickly realized that we needed to begin the work of each session with serious Bible study and theological reflection. The fruits of these conversations evolved into the New Testament/Theological first principles we share. We also are indebted to the ongoing progress of the social sciences in the theory of conflict resolution and encourage our churches to make use of applicable material.

By preparing these Guidelines, the members of our Working Group hope people will be encouraged to reflect together on the **process** of dealing constructively with difficult issues. **Then** we hope they will be strengthened in their resolve to address their differences. In some instances, this could produce new breakthroughs-convergences of thought or action. In others, sticking points will remain, but perhaps new understandings and mutual respect will result. Future generations may benefit from our honest and thoughtful ground work. When we engage in dialogue, we prepare ourselves to learn from God through each other. This may result in change and growth. The process can produce anxiety, but it also can be profoundly satisfying.

We are deeply grateful to those who read and commented on the first draft of the document. Their input has helped us refine the final product. Even though the Working Group has completed its task, we are aware that the search for more effective means to reconciliation is a process. Others may have additional insights about helpful experiences. We invite our readers to walk a similar journey. We pray for fruitfulness.

## **Some Biblical and Theological First Principles**

### **An exploration of assumptions on which these guidelines are based.**

The Working Group members who have met for over a year represent a wide range of traditions within the Church of Jesus Christ. In our work, we quickly recognized the need for shared study of scripture and for prayer--silent, personal, and corporate--as the undergirding of our discussion.

We recognize that these first principles embody ideas about the nature of the church which, though widely accepted in the ecumenical arena, still may be challenged by some. Not all of our members would place equal emphasis on each point in the following. Nevertheless, we think it is better to make the ideas explicit, and to encourage dialogue about these first principles as a part of the process of producing more constructive conflict resolution in ecumenical contexts.

## **The search for unity, if it follows the teaching of Jesus and the way of love which he lived, will follow him to the Cross.**

Churches, no less than individual believers, are called to a life of metanoia, conversion from narrow self-interest to a kind of radical inclusiveness, in which all are invited into the Kingdom of God's love. The search for unity will not come without facing the depth to which our personal, cultural, psychological and sociological histories are clouded by sin.

In practical terms, this means that dialogue must be grounded in a setting in which corporate prayer and the study of Scripture precede and inform the discussion, where hearts and minds literally die to self for the sake of vision and reality which is more truly ecumenical, in the literal meaning of the word, which is embracing the whole world.

## **The Church's prayer runs ahead of its doctrine and its communal life.**

Prayer, a way through which believers respond to the workings of God's love, unites head and heart if it is truly a movement of listening for God's presence. This gives substance to a traditional way of expressing the unity of worship and belief: "Lex orandi, lex credendi"-the way of prayer is the way of belief.

Churches - and not least their authoritative bodies or leaders - are tempted to focus on dogmatic and propositional understandings of God's dealings with human beings. But there is a prior and deeper claim - that of our relationship to the living God whose being is active, relational love, a God who is known as Creator, as the incarnate Jesus who lived and died a fully human life, as the abiding Spirit present in myriad ways throughout human history.

Our ability to speak truth to one another at the level of shared faith and our common experience of God's presence in prayer, contemplation, and reflective reading of Scripture grounds our dialogue, informs our understanding and presentation of the tradition in which we stand, and opens our disagreements to the movement of that Spirit. In the midst of the painful separations within as well as among Churches and traditions, and the often raucous diversity we encounter, we in fact may benefit from the fresh irritants as well as insights brought by others' stories, doctrines, and institutions - the metaphors and realities of their faith journeys.

## **The New Testament record, and the history of the church in the apostolic era and the early years following the death of the apostles, reveals an extraordinary diversity of church belief and practice. Then as now, the issue was how, in the midst of widespread differences of church life, the Christian community could maintain itself as a body without a breaking of koinonia.**

Koinonia, fellowship or community grounded in the Spirit, is never achieved without an acceptance of responsibility for each other, a mutuality in the Spirit which transcends differences. The history of the Church is a record of faithful resolution of differences-as in the coming together over the Gentile mission at the first Council of Jerusalem (recorded in Acts 15). It is also one of failure-as in the division of the Church East and West in the year 1054, and the fracturing of unity in the West at the Reformation. Faithfulness to the Body of Christ inevitably involves a tension between the particularities of time and place and temperament which shape our individual and group allegiances, and the reality that the Gospel is for all people, all times. Yet Christians of differing traditions frequently see one another as belonging to self-contained systems of belief and practice. Today, many of the

sharpest divisions are not those across denominational lines, but within them, over the limits of the diversity of belief and behavior which faith allows.

To speak of the catholicity or universality of the church is not just to delve into the historical aspects of faith and order; it is also to enter the reality of active exchange (and sometimes painful separations) between diverse Christian experiences of believing, and diverse groups of Christians seeking to live in faithfulness in the context of varied cultures and settings.

**The unity that Christians seek, the unity that the one Spirit gives, is an eschatological gift.**

Eschatology, that cluster of beliefs about the end of history, life, and the creation, in Christian teaching is centered on Jesus' words about the Kingdom, the reign of God's love. Human effort cannot wrest unity into being, yet through the already/not yet inbreaking we have experienced through the incarnation, we share in God's design for the Church and for the world. Evidences of the unity which have been achieved in the last century of ecumenical striving in local communities and on a world scale need to be affirmed and celebrated as signs of God's love **here and now**. Our struggles to live together in faith point to the oneness of believers and the unity of all creation. In the midst of the conflicts which stretch out unresolved, our characteristic prayer is still one of thanksgiving.

**Christians already have achieved a real though imperfect unity through our mutual recognition of one another's baptism in water and the Spirit. This is an ecumenical fact, a sign of an already established relatedness which will not let us go, and which draws us toward a fuller unity.**

Through participation in this sacrament of baptism practiced by most Christian churches, we already receive each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. When we enter into Christ's death through the waters of baptism, we also share new life with the resurrected Christ. This is the fundamental basis of all Christian life and belief. When we enter the water we never do it fully alone. We do so in the company of the "saints"-all other Christians who precede and surround us. We live a new life shared with all those baptized into Christ. To ignore this is to deny Christ.

**In the situation of divided Christianity, extraordinary strides have been made in the last hundred years to bridge the differences between separated churches. Despite these gains, the tendency in formal ecumenical encounters continues to be to begin from fixed positions, rather than a common exploration of the mind of Christ.**

It is tempting to search the Scriptures, church traditions, canon law, etc. for texts to support our own positions. Instead, Christ invites us to seek His will through a shared exploration of the whole Gospel, through a discovery of where we have not been listening. As Christians of different traditions seek to hear from one another, our appreciation of Church is enlarged. By coming closer to Christ, we may be drawn closer to each other.

**The unity of the Church is inseparable from its *apostolic* character. In other words, the Church has been sent into all the world.**

Our understandings of what it means to be the church together are (or should be) inseparably linked to our understandings of the Triune God. Our God is self-giving,

outpouring, relational, compassionate, and communicative. We are invited to share in this divine reality, in faith and love. As we do so, personally and corporately, we reflect those same qualities - to the world, to each other. Because of Christ's prayer for unity and because of our baptism into Christ through the Spirit, we have no right to be divided. We-the Church-cannot be an unclouded sacramental sign of God's presence in the world while we remain visibly divided.

**The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal 5:22 NRSV)**

The habits of mind and qualities of spirit which shape Christian character comprise both a way of meeting one another in Christ and a basis for conducting our life together. In the catalogue of signs of this new life outlined by Paul in Galatians, the qualities of living in love, peace, and joy with God are joined by patience, kindness, generosity in relations with others; these in turn are inseparable from those qualities of faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control or restraint which mark the human effort to be in solidarity with one another and all creation. The process of ecumenical discussion is less an exercise in problem-solving about our differences, than it is of shared discernment of the will of God, the mind of Christ, the prompting of the Spirit. The end of our ecumenical labors is reconciliation, a new way of being together. The beginning is a confession of how far we have to travel.

## **Guidelines for Good Practice**

Christ calls us to be reconciled to our sisters and brothers. Communication among parties who are in conflict is a necessary means toward reconciliation. The Gospel affirms that the reconciling Word of God uses our human communication as a vehicle of divine grace. Following are some guidelines for mediation among Christians who are in conflict, as well as for those whose disagreements hold the potential for conflict.

### **The Setting**

1. Select neutral space, mutually agreed upon, preferably not "home turf" to any parties to the conflict. Since ecumenical dialogue is part of the vocation of councils of churches, they can be helpful in providing such space - physical and psychological - for their members.
2. Consider eating together or other shared activities that will provide informal opportunity to hear each other's stories, discover shared values and beliefs, and build a framework for inclusion and resolution.
3. Plan carefully to allow enough time, and/or enough sessions, to air the issues adequately.

### **Participants**

1. Involve persons representative of differing perspectives from the beginning. Share with them planning for the process and setting the agenda.
2. Be mindful about who will represent the parties in conflict. Clarify whether the representation is officially designated, and what that means according to the sending church. When the representative speaks, to what degree is he/she voicing his/her

personal perspective? the perspective/tradition of his/her church? any official teachings which might be applicable?

3. Consider inviting **all** interested parties to join the process. Often, only people in offices of authority or leadership are invited to participate in ecumenical conflict resolution. Because of the significant role of religious leaders in our churches, their participation is important. Nevertheless, consider the role of others, by virtue of their baptism and our understanding of the church as the whole people of God. Who has a stake in the dialogue? Who has an interest in the outcome? Who might bring particular expertise and experience relevant to the discussion? Who will have responsibility for carrying out decisions? Whose status might be changed? Who else might be impacted?
4. Consider whether other members of the ecumenical Church not directly involved in the immediate conflict should be invited to participate. Does its resolution have potential impact on others in the Church? Would the presence of ecumenical partners help achieve a fuller perspective, a better outcome?
5. Seek consistency of participants, to build continuity and maximize the chance for trust.
6. If the scope, potential for divisiveness, or emotional content of the conflict warrant, engage a neutral facilitator, mutually agreeable to the parties. Sometimes it will be advisable to have a facilitator who not only possesses the requisite mediation skills, but also an understanding of the ethos of the churches in conflict. Professional ecumenists sometimes will be able to play this facilitating role, either alone or teamed with a trained conflict consultant.
7. Articulate as clearly as possible the initial aims of the discussion when issuing the invitation. Do your best to avoid surprises!

### **The Spirit In Which We Approach the Discussion**

1. Come to the dialogue theologically grounded, spiritually centered and ecumenically embracing. Be open to interaction between the substance of the faith received and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit among us.
2. Remember that those with whom you are in conflict, like you, are persons of Christian faith.
3. Affirm that reconciliation is God's will and your intention, hope and prayer, and that it stands at the very heart of the Gospel proclamation.
4. Acknowledge the combination of shared and divergent beliefs, histories and cultures that inform each person's perspective.
5. Recognize the temptation to apply stereotypes and slogans to the complexities of real life. Acknowledge and resist the tendency to define oneself "over against" the other. Examine your own motives in approaching the dialogue.
6. Acknowledge and affirm that you, like the other parties to the conflict, do not possess complete and perfect wisdom, knowledge or understanding of the conflict, or of the mystery of faith and how it is manifested through the body of Christ, the Church. Remember that "the expression of truth can take different forms." (Ut Unum Sint, par. 19)
7. Search for those places where common interests meet, those places from which new options for settlement can be invented. If we see the globe from the perspective of space, we know that this is a common world. We cannot walk away from problems because there is no longer such a place as "away." In our bargaining with each other, we need to search for the underlying common interests which can show us the way to maintain humane and respectful relationships.
8. Be willing to set and accept ground rules in general, such as those suggested below, as well as ground rules specific to the particular negotiation.

9. Enter the dialogue in a spirit of commitment to continue the conversation, regardless of difficulty. Agree that walking away from the table, or breaking whatever minimal fellowship exists, is an option of last resort, the burden for which will lie with those wishing to leave.

## Ground Rules

1. Begin by using prayer, reflection on a biblical text, or worship-as difficult as this sometimes may be-to remind participants of our shared faith and to bring each other consciously into the presence of God.
2. Honor the essential humanity, integrity and faithfulness of all participants, especially those with whom you differ.
3. Encourage honest, open, frank communication. Avoid implicit threats. If anxieties arise, air them.
4. Give each person the opportunity to be heard, and attempt to equalize speaking time among the parties. Agree to listen and hold your comments when others are speaking.
5. Avoid offensive, abrasive and abusive language. If one party finds the language of another to be hurtful, put this concern on the table for negotiation.
6. Be receptive to passionate expressions of conviction arising out of personal experience, even though your own experience may be different.
7. When pointing out inconsistencies in another's position, be prepared to acknowledge your own inconsistencies. Refrain from unfair comparisons in which you cite examples of the best in your tradition in contrast to isolated examples of the worst in another's.
8. Refrain from grumbling and complaining outside the mediation circle about persons or matters you are unwilling to be frank about inside the mediation circle.

## During The Mediation Process

See [annotated bibliography](#) for acknowledgments.

1. Differentiate between the people and the conflict. Parties to the discussion should see themselves as partners in a common task, attacking the issue of their conflict, not each other.
2. Encourage all participants to observe the conflict from three different points of view: **Mine** - how I see the problem from my perspective; **Theirs** - how I see the problem when I stand in the shoes of each of the other parties; **"Fly on the Wall"** - how a neutral third party might assess the conflict. The ability to see from the second and third perspectives is particularly helpful.
3. Be aware of the difference between position and interests. Positions represent conclusions we have reached or decisions made. Interests are what caused us to make these decisions.
4. Expand the possibility for resolution by mining for potential solutions or remedies based on mutual interests. When we probe beneath conflicting positions for motivating interests, we may find answers which are satisfactory to all or most parties.
5. Often, confusion arises about aims and about the exact nature of the issues on which we disagree. If you are unsure about something, ask for clarification of the questions being asked and the issues which are at stake.

6. Frame your questions, suggestions and comments in thoughtful and respectful language. Especially avoid using "loaded" words or phrases which you know might carry additional meanings for other participants.
7. Look for and use any factual data or conclusions on which the parties can agree, even if their meaning is interpreted differently. Experts and accurate information will not necessarily resolve differences of religious conviction. But they might help the parties discern, for example, the difference between a stick and a snake on the pathway. These resources may not necessarily do away with difference, but they may do away with muddle.

### Closing The Process

1. Distinguish between agreement and reconciliation. Even when our best efforts cannot produce agreement about some issues, we nevertheless can continue in relationship in ways that acknowledge one another's positions and honor one another's integrity. **Agreement is not always a necessary precondition for reconciliation. It is even possible to agree to disagree, but to re-envision our relationship to each other as part of the same family within which we have differences of perspective.**
2. As a potential fruit of the mediation, explore the value of making public any decisions reached. Agree about whether the content of the discussion will be disclosed at any point, by and to whom, and under what conditions and circumstances. Check to be sure that all participants understand the group's agreements on this point.
3. Affirm conflict as part of human experience, and thus the experience of churches. Consider creating structures and settings for dealing with conflict based on the principle that it is normal and ongoing rather than extraordinary and occasional. Since ecumenical dialogue is part of the vocation of councils of churches, they potentially are an appropriate setting for such endeavors.
4. Finally, conclude a meeting by sharing some sign of peace, such as a handshake or the peace of Christ.

### Conclusion

How does one know when conflict truly has been resolved? How does one know when it might be time to cease deliberations? Unfortunately, conflict resolution is not an exact science which can be measured the same way in all circumstances. Consequently, it is necessary for those directly engaged in the process to determine when sufficient progress has been made. All parties to the discussion, and those who will be affected by their efforts, need to trust one another to make this judgment.

In a sense, all our work remains incomplete, awaiting God's own time for its fruition. In certain circumstances, then, the most prudent decision might be to place the resolution process in recess, allowing time to absorb the full weight of the other's concerns and to pray for guidance from the One who alone has made our peace with God, our Lord Jesus Christ.

## Prayer for Conflict Resolution

God, you have called your people to a ministry of reconciliation.  
When we find ourselves in places of conflict, may we discern your will  
in a world for which Christ gave his life.

In our deliberations with those with whom we differ,  
keep our hearts, minds and spirits open to your speaking  
through each person and in each circumstance.

May we honor and respect each other,  
remembering that you dwell among us and within us,  
as you are a listener to every conversation.

May your Spirit reign in all that we do to overcome alienation  
as we prepare ourselves to gather around that table  
of justice and peace in the life yet to be our joy.

As your Son made us one in baptism,  
may we strive to cherish diversity  
as we are prodded to become one fold.

This we pray through  
Jesus Christ, our Reconciler. AMEN.

## **Annotated Bibliography on the Process of Mediation**

### **Guidelines for good practice**

The following sources contributed significantly to the section on Guidelines for Good Practice:

Davis, Albie M. (1991) "Follett on Facts: Timely Advice from an ADR Pioneer," *Negotiation Journal* (7) 2:132.

A helpful discussion of the role of experts and facts in negotiation.

Fisher, Roger, and Ury, William (1981) *Getting to Yes, Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin.

The widely-respected, best basic manual of negotiation.

Follett, Mary Parker (1951) *Creative Experience*, New York, Peter Smith.

A gem by an early woman pioneer in the field of conflict resolution.

Moore, Christopher W. (1987) *The Mediation Process, Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

The widely-respected, best basic manual of mediation.

### **Other resources**

The following sources will be helpful for those wishing to investigate more fully the subjects of this publication:

Bush, Robert A. Baruch, and Folger, Joseph P., *The Promise of Mediation - Responding to Conflict Through Empowerment and Recognition*, (1994) Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Explores the transformative potential of mediation.

Fisher, Roger, and Brown, Scott, *Getting Together, Building Relationships As We Negotiate*, Penguin Books.

A primer for sustaining relationships in the midst of conflict.

Leas, Speed B., *Church Fights* (1973) Westminster Press.

An introduction to conflict management in local congregations, using organizational development theory.

### **Sources of church-related conflict resolution material**

The Alban Institute, 4125 Nebraska Ave NW, Washington, DC 20016. (202) 244-7320.

Conciliation Quarterly Newsletter, Mennonite Central Committee, 21 South 12th Street, Box M. Akron, PA 17501.(717) 859-1151

### **Dispute resolution materials**

For further information on dispute resolution, contact:

National Institute for Dispute Resolution, 1726 M Street NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC20036. (202) 466-4764.

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