

Keeping Conflict Healthy

Source; Tim Dyer - The Johnmark Extension 2020 (updated 2023)

Conflict is a normal part of family life, relationships and working with others. We all have a wide range of differences from others in terms of values, roles, perspectives, life experiences, education and cultural backgrounds. These differences are important and part of who we are. They can also create conflict and misunderstanding as we may see issues very differently and value different elements of a situation. If we see these differences as a problem not as something to enrich our understanding and then choose to behave poorly just because we see things or understand things differently from others, conflict can get ugly.

Here are some tips for when conflict arises for Christians. This is how to keep conflict in a healthy space:

- Separate out the actual facts and issues from the inner attitudes we have to conflict and to the issues and also from the behaviours we may be tempted to display.
- Do some careful reflective thinking and self-examination of the propriety of our attitudes and behaviours. Are there better and more constructive ways to think and to behave.
- Be prayerful for the situation, for the people involved and for our own humility, gentleness, graciousness and willingness to grow. Choose to honour God in all we think and do.
- If there is an interpersonal break in relationship or tension, go one to one and meet with the other person unless you feel significantly unsafe to do so, then take a support person or a facilitator (not an advocate to promote your position).
- If there has been behaviour that has been damaging or dismissive or your part – be ready to apologise for this or to share your concern about it. It does not remove the conflict, but it clears the way for a more constructive conversation.
- Remember we all contribute to conflict in some way. How have I contributed to this conflict?
- Deal with one issue at a time. If more than one issue is part of the conflict, agree on the order in which they will be discussed.
- Get under the surface, keep the focus of the discussion on the issues, the needs, values and interests which contribute to them. Don't lock two immovable positions or outcomes into a no-win situation. Explore the issues by listening to understand and asking genuine open questions which help you gain perspective on where the other person is coming from, why they see things the way they do and what is important to them. What might you be willing to give which might meet another's needs, interests or values.

- Encourage appropriate expression of feelings and emotions. This is best done through “I statements” e.g. “I am feeling anxious about what this direction might mean for my involvement in the church”, rather than “It’s your fault if I step down because I can’t work with you.”
- Not engage in inappropriate behaviour in conflict which includes, but is not limited to:
 - rejecting, dismissing, disparaging, or discrediting another person
 - name calling
 - mind reading (attributing evil motives another)
 - guilt making (“you made me....”)
 - criticising
- Never make a threat unless there is full intention to act immediately on the threat, should the conditions for fulfilling the threat be met.
- Not to use information from confidential sources or from sources that are unprepared to disclose the information themselves. It is unfair to indicate that such information exists without disclosing it.
- Be fair in making accusations. Fair conflict always allows a person who is charged with inappropriate behaviour:
 - to know who his or her accusers are
 - to learn in detail what his or her accusers’ concerns are
 - and to respond to those who accuse
- Be fair in following process. Conflict usually follows the following steps for dealing with the problem:
 - Acknowledging that there is a problem (for some, if not all)
 - Committing to being prayerful about the situation
 - Inviting those with a stake in the situation to join in dealing with the problem

- Apologising and forgiving for any incidents which may have hurt others
- Mutually defining the problem(s) in objective terms
- Understanding all the contributing factors which have created the issue
- Identifying shared interests, needs and values
- Mutually working on creating options that work for as many as possible
- Prayerfully examining and discerning the elements of each option
- Working out how a decision will be fairly made and who will participate in decision making
- Mutually choosing an option
- Assisting all adjust to the outcome. Providing space and process to heal if needed.