

WE ARE MORAVIANS: YESTERDAY, TODAY & TOMORROW

Dealing With Conflict

Session Objectives:

To verbalize the reality of differing and often opposing views of life, faith, etc. Such differences are a sign of health, not of weakness or failure.

To search for a viable model in which to deal with conflict.

To see conflict as a possibility for personal and spiritual growth instead of division and destruction.

Background

Contrary to popular opinion, conflict is a sign of health. When there is conflict, one can be sure that someone cares enough about someone or something to speak on its behalf. Conflict is a sign of life. If two friends, a couple, a parent and youth, a family, church or whatever never experience conflict, then the relationships involved are most likely superficial, not growing and could even be stagnant. Adding a dimension to the last session on love, if one chooses to love, one will find one's self at some time or another in conflict because of it.

People experience conflicts of varying types every day. How these conflicts are dealt with determines whether they become positive or negative, growth oriented or destructive. Because of physiological changes, hormones, identity and independence issues, not to mention the towering social and cultural considerations of today, teenagers can be walking conflict time bombs! Conflicts are like puncture wounds. The longer they are ignored and not treated, the greater the possibility of infection and serious consequences. Too often conflicts degenerate into contests of power as to who can shout the loudest or who can muster enough control to badger the other into submission. Watch any competitive reality show today and see how destructive uses of conflict are encouraged! But dealing with conflict in this way only leads to destruction, pain and severed relationships. Teachers, parents and young people are constantly searching for positive ways to deal with conflict and have much to contend with in today's culture which seems to foster division and disagreements. Isn't there a better way? Does our Christian faith call us to a more constructive and positive way of dealing with conflict? If conflict is inevitable, how can we make it work *for us*?

Those are good questions! This session will attempt to offer a model for dealing with conflict that strives to come to a mutually acceptable agreement on both sides. This attempt is made, knowing that no single model will work for all conflict. Sometimes an external conflict between two people is a cover for a deeper, different type of conflict within one (or both) of them. Many conflicts are multifaceted at their roots. Therefore, the type of conflict we will deal with in this session will be *substantive*; that is, conflict that deals with tangible and objective components. For example, a teenager wants the car to go to the movies at a specific time on Saturday. This teenager's parents have other plans, so a conflict takes place between the desires and needs of both parties. But the conflict is tangible as it refers to the *facts* of the movie, car and specific time.

So what to do? *This model assumes that each side will be willing to sit down and talk to the other with a reasonable degree of openness, honesty and flexibility.* If such willingness is not present, the chances of resolving the conflict in a mutually acceptable manor are reduced. Also, the more emotions such as anger are involved, the lower the effectiveness of this model. Such emotions tend to lower one's ability to be open, honest and flexible. In our current political climate, such conflict resolution as is being recommended here is virtually absent. Admittedly, such a climate along with media shows such as Survivor do not model much openness, honesty or flexibility, which makes teaching responsible conflict resolution to teenagers much more difficult. But teenagers as well as adults need to be reminded that resolving conflict is a two-way street and nobody ever gets everything they want in the real world! Perhaps Hollywood and the government could use a few of these lessons!

The model is basically sitting down and working through a set of clarifying questions. By using the above conflict example, we will work through the model to a conclusion.

1 – **What is the conflict?** Karen wants to borrow the car Saturday afternoon at two o'clock to go to the movies with some girlfriends, but her parents already have plans to visit a sick relative at that time.

2 – **What are the certainties in this conflict?** The parents own the car, Karen has her own money for a movie ticket, the movie will not be shown past Saturday, the sick relative's condition is rapidly getting worse.

3 – **What is the background or context of the conflict; or what are other issues that impact this conflict?** Parents haven't seen this relative in a while, Karen has not fulfilled her responsibilities in keeping her room clean, parents have other obligations that make Saturday the only day they can go, and Karen is actually hoping to meet a guy at this movie.

Note: Usually the context of a conflict contains element that may not directly affect the conflict, but indirectly will affect the outcome. They lie beneath the surface. In this situation the context reveals possible guilt, unfulfilled obligations, unchangeable obligations, and possible deception; all of which play a big part in the outcome of the conflict. Again, honesty and openness are a **must** for both sides. It is essential that each side understands any contributing factors that may cause one party to be more forceful in their stand. Not to be willing to share in the context will complicate dramatically reaching a mutually beneficial conflict solution.

4 – **Considering the certainties and the context, what are some alternatives that can be negotiated that would allow both parties to reach their goal?** Parents leaving earlier in the day, Karen going to a later movie, one of Karen's friends driving instead. Some negotiation helpers might be: Karen fulfilling her responsibilities, both sides being sensitive to the other's situation, admitting the reality of outside contributors like guilt, meeting the guy, etc.

5 – **How will the conflict be resolved?** Karen and her parents go Saturday morning to visit the sick relative and return in plenty of time for Karen to go to the movie.

One of the greatest benefits of this model is the fostering of better communication between conflicting parties. It is much easier to negotiate and find an acceptable solution when both sides understand both sides. Again, this method will not work for all

conflicts, but it makes strides toward dealing with conflicts that many teenagers come in contact with in every day life.

The Bible offers good advice in dealing with conflict. Jesus speaks of conflict within the church in Matthew 18:15-20. The value in this passage is the urge toward communication between those in conflict. This passage also suggests that sometimes conflicts cannot be resolved. In the verses following this passage Jesus speaks of forgiveness that is certainly needed whether conflicts are resolved or not.

Paul in Ephesians 4:25-32 speaks of honest, dealing with anger, and gives good advice for negotiating. A caring and forgiving spirit is solid ground on which to begin dealing with conflict. To deal constructively with conflict will foster integrity within the individual and will strengthen relationships. It can be a positive experience!

Materials and Session Preparation

All you will need for this session will be a dry erase board or flip chart and Bibles for each individual. But you may need to spend some time in prayer and reflecting on how you go about conflict in *your* life. The success of the session will depend on your and the class members' openness and honesty in talking about conflicts that have happened or are happening now. How easily emotions get involved when we feel we are being wronged or something isn't treating us fairly! Senior highs are already dealing with so many things that they have never before encountered, that they often live in a state of conflict. So do most adults! You may need to be sensitive to what you hear if your class members open up. You may also need carefully to help them see that there is always more than meets the eye when one finds one's self in conflict. This may be an important session! You may want to copy down the model outlined in the Background material ahead of time on a flip chart to use in the session. You could also make cards with the outline to hand out for them to take with them.

Session Ingredients/Options

1 – Ask the group who was involved in a conflict the past week. A conflict is a kind of disagreement, so no matter how big or small, if they have had any disagreements at all, they have been in conflict! What were some of them? What happened? You may get quite an array of conflicts!

There are generally three kinds of conflicts: conflicts within one's self, conflicts between persons, and conflicts over situations and circumstances. Often conflicts embody more than one kind. Introduce the topic of the day with these comments and follow them by saying that often we see conflict as bad, but in reality it can be an opportunity for growth. Conflict is inevitable and a normal part of life. Conflict can be good if approached in a positive manner. Let the group offer their comments and feedback.

2 – Using a dry erase board or flip chart, work with the group on a definition of conflict. Take it a step farther than just calling it a disagreement. Try to dig a little deeper into what happens in a conflict.

Now make a list of the places in their lives where they experience conflict (i.e., home, school, work, siblings, relationships, etc.). Make another list of places where they observe conflict taking place they they may not necessarily be involved (i.e., church, government, between countries, races, religions, etc.). What happens when a conflict takes place?

By this point a number of conflicts both experienced and observed have been named through the list making. Ask for and then check the ones on the list that seem to be more troublesome to them. The purpose of this exercise is to get the group focused completely on the subject matter.

3 – Have the group turn in their Bibles to Matthew 18:15-20, and ask someone to read the passage. This passage actually deals more specifically with conflict in the church, but the message applies to any interpersonal conflict. What advice does this passage give us in dealing with conflict? What reality does this passage also raise when dealing with conflict? Has anyone used this kind of approach in dealing with conflict, that is, going and talking with the person with whom you are having the conflict? Did it work? Why or why not?

Now have the group turn to Ephesians 4:25-32, and ask someone to read the passage out loud. What additional advice does this passage offer in dealing with conflict? You may want to record their answers on the flip chart or dry erase board. How would these things help when you are in conflict?

4 – Share with the group the model suggested in the Background material. Keeping in mind the guidance offered by Jesus and Paul, pick (or have them pick) one of the conflicts brought up earlier. Then take the model and apply the conflict to it step by step, asking for the input from the group. Depending upon class participation, more than one could be applied.

Now *role play* a conflict having the class members act out each side of a conflict of their choice using the model. Continue to remind them of the process, the biblical guidance and purpose of coming up with a mutually acceptable result.

5 – Debrief the class if need be. As a closing, ask the class if there are conflicts in which they are involved where this model may be helpful. If so, encourage them. Also ask if the class can offer prayer together asking for strength, patience and guidance in dealing with those conflicts and any others they may bring up. Join hands and close with prayer.