

# A Primer on Levels of Conflict

## Level 0 Conflict Avoidance

Almost everyone prefers to avoid confrontation and conflict. Especially if we need to live side by side with people in an office, in a small town, in a family, in a church group. There is a big difference between A) this normal preference for keeping things running smoothly and B) deep conflict avoidance. Preferring A but being willing at times to face conflict requires regular habits of deep listening to God and others, setting your own bias slightly aside for the moment and really hearing others in order that the community thrives together. A strong preference for B involves regular habits of either passively letting things lie or actively intervening to distract from or hide the disagreement.

When you listen deeply and know that there is truly a disagreement or hurt or misunderstanding, you can make one of two decisions: A) decide to get the disagreement cleared up by honest conversation for the good of everyone, or B) decide to ignore it and hope it will go away, doing whatever is necessary to not address the disagreement. Choice B, done systemically across the community over the long haul, probably means you are at Level 0.

## Level 1 A Problem to Solve

In human community there will always be problems to solve as well as multiple options. Even a single person can feel pulled in two directions and have a hard time coming to terms with how to solve a problem. But gather two or more persons, throw in a problem, and you will quickly have several solutions emerging. Human beings are natural problem solvers. That is not the difficulty here. A church council or board, let's say, learns there is a problem on the horizon: a bricks-and-mortar problem like a leaky roof, or a people-related problem like a sharp drop in worship attendance. Almost right away the board members will try to think up solutions. Or they won't be able to think up any viable solutions, and they will feel frustrated, disempowered. Or only one viable solution is offered, but some people have doubts about its effectiveness. If this is where your group is sitting, you are probably at Level 1.

## Level 2 Disagreement

Let's say that a problem has arisen and been brought to the attention of a church council or board. While most groups of persons might start suggesting ways to solve the problem, sometimes a disagreement arises, either over the seriousness (or not) of the problem or over the type of solution that will work best. What seems obvious to some members is not at all obvious to others, for many reasons. This is Level 2 conflict. With good leadership and general good will, such disagreements may be acknowledged, discussed, all views heard, and an appropriate solution agreed upon, even if it's not the favorite solution of everyone.

So Level 2 conflict, Disagreement, isn't automatically dangerous. But for church councils and boards, it is particularly important that there are well-known habits or rituals in place for use when people can see a disagreement forming. The best of these rituals involve deep listening for God, for one another, and for the neighbors the local church is in community with. Church Innovations' Spiritual Discernment for Thriving in Change is ideally suited for Level 2 conflicts because of its emphasis on deep listening, dwelling in the Word, and asking the question "What is God up to in this issue for us?" Really good solid work using TIC on several Level 2 disagreements in a row can prevent future challenges from escalating into higher conflict, and church members will have experienced disagreements as times when God might be giving a challenge as a gift and giving multiple passionately-proposed solutions as abundant wisdom for a congregation.

## Level 3 Contest

Imagine that a problem has arisen in a local church, and that problem has moved during one or two council meetings into a Level 2 conflict in which there is some serious disagreement over how to solve it. One council member has suggested, for example, that it must be fixed immediately and proposes a communication asking the entire congregation for help, while another council member has asked, for example, that the issue be sent to a sub-team for study, later reporting to the council and suggesting solutions some months down the road. The two council members are each certain, with good reason, that their solution is best for everyone. The two suggestions are too different for compromise, and at the end of the council meeting the issue isn't resolved. Afterward people begin telephoning or chatting in the parking lot or at other meetings, and "sides" begin to form on the question. Wrestling with this problem has become a contest between two (or more) factions. This is Level 3.

Level 3 conflict is not immediately a danger to the Body of Christ, and the opportunity to get people thinking passionately about what might be best in the long run for the local church is actually a very good thing. This may be a time when the Holy Spirit has given the church a challenge in order to help bring it alive. Once again, Church Innovations' Spiritual Discernment for Thriving in Change process was built for just such a level of conflict, provided that the contest has not yet turned mean-spirited and people are still capable of the deep listening that the TIC process requires: listening to the Word, to one another, and to the neighbor. If general good will is still present, there is no better strategy.

At some point during Level 3, however, the contest can become mean, the humor can become sarcastic, and the defense walls can naturally go up, to the point where deep listening can be very, very difficult. If your group is in this Level 3.5 or higher, you will need excellent leadership and very neutral, safe space and time to visit the issue together, building trust before you can employ the TIC process and try to together discern what God may be calling you to do about the problem. However, churches that have been to Level 3 and still remained capable of listening to God, one another, and the neighbor to do excellent spiritual discernment will often look back on that time as one of holy growth and deepening of their faith walk together.

## Level 4 Fight or Flight

A congregation has been having a contest over an issue. It feels as though people have been in a tug of war, a two-way contest or even a three- or four-way contest, depending on the situation it is facing. People are passionate about their desired solution. They have argued their positions and, although they were listening to the other side(s) for awhile, it has become clear to them that their own solution is the only acceptable one. Many things have been said, both out loud in public as well as behind people's backs on the phone, in letters, and in private meetings, that have damaged trust and made things feel increasingly unsafe for each side to be in the presence of one another. This is Level 4, where people must either fight or flee from one another.

Level 4 conflict requires special skills of listening and reconciling, skills that, because of the high passion as well as the onset of conflict fatigue, church members probably do not have at that moment. Most local churches will invite an outsider to work with the council or board and with other groups in the church, to help do the deep listening for them, still giving people the chance to listen for themselves. A specially trained mediator or counselor can bring invaluable help at this point and is sometimes able to roll the conflict level back down to 3, and to assist the church to work out the problem for themselves. Most church bodies have such persons on their staffs or on call for work in their region. Churches that have escalated to Level 4 and been helped back into a level where they can listen again and be reconciled with one another often say the experience strengthened them and their dependence on the Holy Spirit, making future challenges much easier to bear.

## Level 5 Intractable Situation

Once in awhile a disagreement in a local church moves through the Contest stage where people take sides on the issue and fight over it without resolution, becoming less and less able to be in the same room with one another, having to either fight or flee when they encounter an opponent. For many reasons, if the two sides cannot communicate any longer, the parties remain apart, the gulf growing wider between them. Even an outside mediator cannot bring compromise or reconciliation. It feels as though the only safe solution is to bring in lawyers to resolve the dispute. This is Level 5.

Excellent professionals serve the church in these difficult times. They know exactly what has to be accomplished in order for a church and its members to move ahead. They attend to every detail. Every major church body has a list of these good professionals for help when Level 5 is reached, and they are a gift to the church as they create the best solution out of a bad situation.