

**Catholic Relief Services / The Campus Advocate  
Session # 9**

**POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

**PURPOSE OF PROGRAM:** *To better understand the nature of conflict resolution, and to explore how it can be applied to the current political climate.*

**FACILITATOR NOTE:** *For this activity, you will need a flip chart and markers.*

**Gathering Prayer:**

**All:** Loving God, we thank you for bringing us together so we may learn how to better serve you and your people. Please bless our conversation, and grant us the gift of your wisdom.

In Christ's name we pray,  
Amen

***The Beatitudes***

**Reader 1:**

(1) Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, (2) and he began to teach them saying:

**Reader 2:**

(3) "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
(4) Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

**Reader 3:**

(5) Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.  
(6) Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

**Reader 4:**

(7) Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.  
(8) Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

**Reader 1:**

(9) Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.  
(10) Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

**Reader 2:**

(11) "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. (12) Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

*(Matthew 5: 1-12)*

- Compare the challenge put forth in this reading from Matthew to the current political climate in our country.

**Reader 3:** "As do most things in life, conflict is a mix of the good, the bad and the uncertain. On the positive side, it allows us to air important issues, produce new and creative ideas and release pent up emotions. It is a force for social change, can help re-evaluate and /or clarify goals, perceptions, missions etc in groups and organizations. On the negative side, it can spiral out of control and cause frustration, tension and at worst turn into violence. The negative side of conflict is more prominent, reinforced as it is in the media where the universal solution to problems appears to be to shoot somebody." (Folger 1)

**Reader 4:** When someone decides to speak out on issues (especially as important as the ones we've discussing at these meetings) conflict is bound to rise. Which isn't bad in itself – it's how we handle the conflict that determines whether we did more harm than good by even bringing the topic up. The following "Conflict Web" exercise will be an opportunity to examine our attitudes towards conflict.

**FACILITATOR NOTE:** *The following exercise is taken from the Caritas Internationalis manual on Peacebuilding, <http://www.caritas.org>*

**Procedures:**

**1)** Draw a circle in the middle of the flip chart and write the word "political conflict" in the center. Ask participants to quickly call out words or phrases that they associate with the word conflict. These may be descriptions of situations, parties to conflict, feelings, types of conflict, sources of conflict, or effects of conflict. Accept all responses without discussion or judgment and add them on the chart, drawing a line radiating out from the word "conflict" and writing the participants' words at the end of each line.

**2)** As participants suggest more responses, try to cluster responses (for example, connecting feelings about conflict or connecting all words associated with types of conflict). Some responses may trigger related associations that become branches of the web.

**3)** Continue asking for responses for approximately 10 minutes, or until the group stops offering responses.

**Discussion:** When the web is complete, ask the group to look at the drawing and describe what they think it shows. Often the majority of the responses are negative or violent. If this is the case, point this out to the group. Point out if you see many of the responses addressing feelings, or types of conflict.

**Questions to ask include:**

- Does anyone have any positive associations with the words "political conflict or political polarization?"
- Why is it that our reactions to such conflict are so negative?

**Reader 1:** "In our everyday routines, we interpret events or conversations based upon our past experiences, religious and cultural background, and even our mood. Our senses of sight, taste, smell, hearing, and touch also influence our interpretation. What we believe to be true is relative to who we are. In any situation, multiple interpretations exist. Our perception of events, information, people, or relationships influences how we communicate, how we see and act in conflict, and how we define solutions to problems" (Caritas).

**Reader 2:** "Conflict and communication are intimately tied to perceptions. How we see the world depends upon where we stand, and where we stand is affected by our beliefs that are grounded in our culture, religion, family background, status, gender, and personal experiences. Individuals who experience the same event who come from the same general background will still come up with different perspectives on that event, and define "truth" in that setting in different ways" (Caritas).

- Think about a political disagreement you had with a family member or close friend who shares similar values and beliefs. Did perception play a role in your disagreement?

**Reader 3:** "Negotiation is a basic way of getting what you want from someone else, usually using verbal communication. We all negotiate every day – with a vendor, with our friends or relatives in deciding what to eat or where or how to travel. Negotiation is a useful skill that can lead to civil communication about polarizing issues" (Caritas).

**Reader 2:** "Separate the people from the conflict. The relationship with a person or people is separate from any substantive conflict. By disentangling the relationship from the problem, we can reduce the possibility of miscommunication and emotions negatively affecting our discussion" (Caritas).

**Reader 3:** "Focus on interests, not positions. Interests are our underlying needs, desires, concerns, wants, values or fears. Interests motivate people, but often individuals will state a position. For example,

many countries have a position that they “will not negotiate with terrorists.” This is a position, but the underlying interests probably relate to concerns and fears about personal security. In conflict, individuals and groups often state only one position, and it will be difficult to negotiate compromises on positions. Behind positions are multiple interests, and focusing on interests can allow for more room to generate acceptable solutions” (Caritas).

**Reader 4:** “To resolve conflict, both parties must find a solution that is of mutual gain and set relevant standards or criteria by which parties can evaluate the fairness of acceptability of a negotiated settlement” (Caritas).

- Were you involved in a conflict where you found any of these tactics helpful?
- Who are people you know that handle conflict well?

**Reader 1:** “Communication problems can be an important cause of conflict. Communication problems can occur across almost any social divide, such as those between people of different cultures, ages, educational backgrounds, and socioeconomic classes. However, our experience is that the old adage “most conflicts are actually communication problems” is not really very reliable. The vast majority of conflicts would not exist without some real difference of interest. This difference may be hard to uncover, it may be redefined over time, and occasionally it may be trivial, but it is there nonetheless. Communication processes can cause conflicts and may exacerbate them, but they are rarely the sole source of the difficulty” (Folger 5).

- Do you agree with this understanding of communication?

## ARENAS FOR CONFLICT

**Reader 2:** “One important arena of conflict is the interpersonal relationship. Interpersonal conflicts include those between husbands and wives, siblings, friends, and roommates. But interpersonal relationships are broader than this, encompassing those among co-workers, supervisors and employees, landlords and tenants, and neighbors” (Folger 7).

**Reader 3:** “A second important genre of conflicts are those that occur in groups. This arena includes families, work groups, small businesses, classes, clubs, juries, and even therapy or consciousness-raising groups. Because much work is done in groups, this arena has been studied extensively and offers a wide range of conflict situations for analysis. These conflicts offer insights about group cohesion, the influence of climates, coalitions, working habits, and the distribution of power” (Folger 8).

**Reader 4:** “Finally, conflicts occur in intergroup settings. In this case, the focus is on individuals as representatives of social groups, rather than as unique and special individuals. This arena includes conflicts among people who represent different gender, ethnic, or cultural groups. Intergroup conflicts may also arise among parties who are viewed as representatives of different teams, organizations or political action groups. In these conflicts, the individual’s identity is supplanted by issues of group identity. Prejudice, stereotyping, and ideologies often come into play (Putnam and Poole 1987)” (Folger 8).

- Which of these arenas apply to politics?

## PRODUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE CONFLICT INTERACTION

**Reader 1:** “The sociologist Lewis Coser (1956) distinguished realistic from nonrealistic conflicts. Realistic conflicts are based in disagreements over the means to an end or over the ends themselves. In realistic conflicts the interaction focuses on the substantive issues the participants must address to resolve their underlying incompatibilities. Nonrealistic conflicts are expressions of aggression in which the sole end is to defeat or hurt the other” (Folger 9).

**Reader 2:** “Participants in nonrealistic conflicts serve their own interests by undercutting those of the other party. Coser argues that because nonrealistic conflicts are oriented toward the expression of

aggression, force and coercion are the means for resolving these disputes. Realistic conflicts, on the other hand, foster a wide range of resolution techniques—force, negotiation, persuasion, even voting—because they are oriented toward the resolution of some substantive problem. Although Coser's analysis is somewhat oversimplified, it is insightful and suggests important contrasts between productive and destructive conflict interaction (Deutsch 1973)" (Folger 9).

**Reader 3:** "Productive conflict interaction is sometimes competitive. Both parties must stand up for their own positions and strive for perceived understanding if a representative outcome is to be attained (Cahn 1990). This may result in tension and hostility, but they should be regarded as paths to a higher goal. Although parties in productive conflicts hold strongly to their positions, they are also open to movement when convinced that such movement will result in the best decision" (Folger 10).

**Reader 4:** "The need to preserve power, save face, or make the opponent look bad does not stand in the way of change. In contrast, during destructive conflicts parties may become polarized, and the defense of a "noble", non-negotiable position often becomes more important than working out a viable solution" (Folger 10).

**Reader 1:** "Of course, this description of productive and destructive conflict interaction is an idealization. It is rare that a conflict exhibits all the constructive or destructive qualities just mentioned. Most conflicts exhibit both productive and destructive interaction. However, better conflict management will result if parties can sustain productive conflict interaction patterns" (Folger 10).

- What examples of positive conflict can you suggest?
- In light of the gospel message, and all that has been discussed, what new insights can be applied to the political polarization that might be happening on your campus, in the country, in the world?

### **Sending Forth Prayer**

*(split group into A and B parts)*

**A --** O almighty One who created everything,  
you are witness to the sincerity of each one in this circle.

**B --** O you trees who have been here since time immemorial,  
as proven by your thick trunk and deep roots,  
you bear silent witness to the words spoken here today.

**A --** O you stones who have been here for centuries,  
we believe that you have grown from dust to pebbles to stones  
through hundreds of years.  
You are witness to the stories and tears that have unfolded here today.

**B --** You winds who blow gently around us,  
you fan our bodies and souls with your gentle breeze.  
Cool our anger and let the realities brought out here remain within this circle  
and not be blown and scattered all around the land until the proper time.

*Prayer from East Timor*

*(Prayer Without Borders, Celebrating Global Wisdom, page 71. <http://www.crsprayer.org/>)*

**Caritas Internationalis 2002, Peacebuilding: a Caritas Training Manual**

<http://www.caritas.org>

**Folger, Scott-Poole, & Stutman, Working, Through Conflict: Strategies for Relationships, Groups, and Organizations 4th ed. Longman: New York, 2001.**

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