

## **Engaging Conflict in Small Groups**

A look at the deeper issues underlying personality clashes

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Sooner or later, every small group will experience conflict. In some groups, conflict will become evident from the first meeting. In others, great pain is taken to avoid conflict. The members maneuver around it and make it clear that "we don't do conflict here." But the ways we behave in a small group reflect how we will behave outside of it, and handling conflict well in our group can lead to better ways of dealing with the uncomfortable issues people face every day.

### **A Case Study**

Mary and Jim are group members. Mary sees herself as a "truth-speaker." She is perceptive and reads people like a map. She is always aware of the "temperature" of her small group. She listens to what is said and has an ability to hear what isn't being said—and she is more curious about the later. Her greatest desire is for authenticity and honesty.

Everybody sees Jim as a "grace-giver." He is trusting and takes people at face value. He values peace, and patience is one of his greatest virtues. He is affirming and very sensitive to the shame in others. His overriding desire for the group is that it feels safe, loving, and supportive.

Mary and Jim, to one degree or another, are in every group. Every group needs what they offer. But before Mary and Jim can offer what is best in them, they will have to face the inevitable conflict that their styles of relating will create.

Behind every conflict is a story that goes far deeper than the presenting clash. Jim grew up in a home with a dominating, angry mother. His father would work hard all day and come home to a wife who would dump her frustrations on him. Jim felt sorry for his father and felt contempt for his mother. She was not the virtuous "Proverbs 31" woman he heard about in church. But his father never complained. He was "longsuffering." Jim

sometimes wished his father would step up and confront his mother, but he felt pretty sure his father would lose that battle.

Mary grew up in a home that had lots of secrets. No one talked about dad's alcoholism. No one dared ruffle dad's feathers when he came home, even though the tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife. When Mary was sexually abused by her father, and later by her brother, her mother had a lock installed on Mary's door but never talked about what happened. Mary sat behind her locked door angrier with her mother than with her abusers. Secrets and silence became the enemies that Mary vowed to fight.

Now, Mary and Jim find themselves in the same small group. It doesn't take long for a perceptive Mary to pigeonhole Jim as a weak wimp who is more comfortable with the appearance of harmony than the guts to be honest. And, hard as it is for Jim to admit, Mary's pursuit of people feels dangerous and makes him want to avoid her at all costs.

In group, Mary is frustrated every time Jim seems to dismiss someone's struggles with a verse from the Bible and an offer to pray. Conversely, Jim feels that Mary plows right into areas of shame with little sensitivity. Sometimes it seems that Mary's outrage over injustice is stronger than anyone else's. Jim feels that he must counter her impact by soothing the group.

Unless this conflict is addressed, it will further propagate the dysfunction that both Jim and Mary felt in their families growing up. The group will not be strong enough to bear "truth-speaking," and it will feel that its "grace-giving" is patronizing. The safe, loving, honest, and authentic community will be lost.

## **A New Perspective**

Conflict should not be viewed as a problem that threatens to destroy your group, but as an opportunity to grow the group. It is the unacknowledged and unaddressed conflict that is dangerous. Conflict that is entered into

and resolved leads to deeper intimacy, whether in a group, in a marriage, between any two individuals, or with God.

As you think about addressing a conflict, ask yourself how to engage the issue while still valuing the opinions, observations, and feelings of each member. Remember also that, because the enemy of our souls delights in continued division, engaging in conflict resolution is warfare against him. So prayer is a crucial weapon. Ask for receptive hearts, listening ears, and a resolve to strengthen the unity of the group by honestly facing the issues at hand.

Depending on the severity of the conflict and who is involved, you may need an outside person to facilitate a resolution. If so, you will want to make that person's role clear—to facilitate and mediate the resolution process, not to resolve the conflict themselves.

## **A Practical Method**

So how does a group enter into conflict for the good of its members? Here are a few simple steps to work through:

1. The group leader should define the conflict as he/she recalls it. "Our conflict is about the differences between Jim's way and Mary's way of engaging the group and the tension that we and they are experiencing as a result."
2. Ask the group members if the conflict has been defined correctly as they recall it. Go around the circle and give each person an opportunity to respond. Some will have something to say; others may simply nod their head in agreement.
3. Ask, "How has this conflict felt to you?" Or, "What has been stirred up in you as the conflict has become evident?" The purpose here is to give each group member an opportunity to acknowledge and express their feelings. There is no right or wrong answer here. Silence or withholding does not support the conflict resolution process, so encourage everyone to speak.

4. Invite group members to ask questions of any other group member for clarity. Be careful to make sure that one person does not dominate this time so that the process begins to lose momentum for the others.
5. Ask each person: "What were you hoping would happen in this meeting?" "What did you want for yourself?" "What did you want for Jim, Mary, or the group?"
6. Ask each person what needs to happen for them to feel that this is a safe and healthy group again. What a member may express may not necessarily be something the group can guarantee (e.g. that the conflict will never happen again). The leader's role is to make sure all have been heard and to stay engaged in the process for the sake of the group. Allowing the process to stall or wander will make the group feel unsafe and lose trust.
7. Ask each person, "Can you recommit to this group?" If someone says "no," go back to points 3 and 4 and try again. Typically a group will want to get going again and not remain stalled.

This process relies on the integrity of the group to call one another out. At its best, it is a way for the body of Christ to minister to each other. Here are some questions for a leader to keep in mind during this process:

- Did the people in the conflict hear one another accurately? It is often helpful to ask Jim what he heard Mary say. Then ask Mary, "Did Jim hear you accurately?" Reverse the process, asking Mary what she heard Jim say. Many conflicts escalate due to faulty perceptions as communication passes through each participant's emotional filter.
- Did each person take ownership of what they perceived to be their part in the conflict? If your group is at a stage where you can go deeper, these discipleship questions can lead to real change: 1) Is this a pattern in my life? 2) How does this pattern in my life affect those in relationship with me? 3) How do I feel about the way I impact others? 4) Who or what does this situation remind me of?
- Has any group boundary been broken? If so, is this something (or is there something else) we need to need to talk about now or later?

When you notice a conflict is occurring, be ready to pull out this list and walk through it. Believe me, your group will be grateful for you and your courage. Many of your group members live daily with chaos and conflict that never gets resolved, so your willingness to enter into conflict is a real gift to them!

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Discuss:

1. In what ways has your group experienced conflict in recent months?
2. What will be the hardest thing about addressing conflict within your group? How can you overcome that?
3. What steps should you take to begin engaging and resolving your conflicts in the near future?