Towards Healthy Conflict Responses for Pastoral Ministers: Drawing on the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Response Theory and Survey

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The destructive power of conflict to threaten relationships and divide communities can generate feelings ranging from mild ambivalence to intense anxiety for pastoral leaders called upon to address conflict. Since I began teaching courses in the practice of ministry more than ten years ago, I have found that apprehension about responding to conflict is perhaps the most common worry expressed to me by students preparing for pastoral leadership.[1] The fact that differences and disagreements are a normal part of all human relationships and that conflict is a healthy part of any dynamic group[2] may be challenging to accept when students find themselves in conflicts in their faith communities that they feel ill equipped to manage and when they witness to differences and disagreements that produce bitterness, erode collaboration, and lead to disunity. And, these ministry students are by no means unique in their concern; the potential for conflict to harm relationships leads many to regard it with trepidation.[3]

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TOWARDS HEALTHY CONFLICT RESPONSES: A SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE

Although respect for the destructive potential of conflict seems appro-priate, even wise, it is essential for students in pastoral ministry to resist the temptation to avoid or repress the tensions of differences and disagree-ments under the illusion that this is what promotes unity and growth in community. In fact, a *lack* of conflict may point to "unhealthy agreement," which can stifle relationships and render groups static.[4] Moving towards a healthy response to conflict requires a shift in perspective that may be chal-lenging to make—from the assumption that conflict is inherently bad and destructive to the realization that differences and disagreements can lead to growth and progress. Professor of international peacebuilding John Paul Lederach explains that not only is conflict normal in human relationships, but it is also "a motor of change."[5] He encourages a shift in terminology from "conflict management" to "conflict transformation" because the language of transformation points to the potential for conflict to lead to "healthy rela-tionships and communities."[6]

Healthy conflict responses require the recognition that both disagree-ments *and* agreements can be either healthy or unhealthy and require the ability to distinguish between them. The awareness that "experience is not what happens to us. Experience is what we do with what happens to us"[7] is a helpful perspective from which to appreciate that a pastoral minister has the agency to choose healthy responses to conflict by learning to perceive and address it effectively. This is of vital importance since whether differ-ences and disagreement will undermine productivity or fuel creativity de-pends, to a large degree, on how conflict is perceived and addressed.[8]

THE THOMAS-KILMANN RESPONSE MODE THEORY AND SURVEY

The field of psychology offers theories and psychometric tools that al-low us to better understand human identity and grow in our intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. This growth is essential for effective pas-toral ministry. Regarding how human beings respond to conflict, manage-ment science specialists Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann have devel-oped a theory of five different conflict response modes and a survey that assesses which of these a person prefers when responding to conflict. This has long been in use in business management and has been praised as "the

instrument that is most widely used in both research and training" related to conflict response.[9] I would like to suggest that learning this theory, and using the survey, can go a long way towards helping pastoral ministers develop a comprehensive perception of the dynamics of conflict and lead their congregations towards addressing it in healthy, productive ways.

The Five Modes

Building on seminal conflict and personality-type theories,[10] Thomas and Kilmann identify five conflict-handling modes that describe the diverse ways people respond to conflict. These are based upon two dimensions of the conflict response: the "distributive dimension"—the perception that one side will win and the other lose because there is a fixed amount of resources—and the "integrative dimension"—the perception that it is possible to integrate the needs of both sides to have a mutually positive outcome in a conflict.[11] In the Thomas-Kilmann model, the distributive dimension is called "assertiveness" (represented by the vertical arrow in figure 1) and the integrative dimension is called "cooperativeness" (represented by the horizontal arrow). Each of the five conflict responses identified by Thomas and Kilmann contains a different combination of these two dimensions. Assertiveness focuses on the outcomes for the self and cooperativeness focuses on the outcomes for the other(s) or the group.

Figure 1. Conflict-Handling Modes (Ralph Kilmann, 2019, www.kilmanndiagnostics.com). This slightly adapted version is used with permission.

The five conflict-handling modes are avoiding, competing, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating

1. The avoiding response withdraws from conflict. The goal is to maintain neutrality. This is a lose/lose position because neither assertiveness nor cooperativeness is realized.

2. The competing response emphasizes self-interest as the central focus, to the exclusion of the interest of the other(s) or the group. The goal is to meets one's own needs regardless of the needs of the other(s). This is a zero-sum scenario because my "win" is at the expense of the other's "loss." Assertiveness is realized, but cooperativeness is not.

3. The accommodating response sacrifices self-interest for the sake of the other(s) or the group's interest. The goal is to maintain harmony. This is also a zero-sum scenario because the group's gain is a loss for the self. Cooperativeness is realized, but assertiveness is lost.

4. The compromising response attains something for the self and the other(s) or group but doesn't fully realize the interests of either. The goal is fairness. The outcome is a positive sum but a minimal one; assertiveness and cooperativeness are realized to some extent but not fully.

5. The collaborating response honors both assertiveness and cooperativeness. The goal is to fully realize both the interests of the self *and* those of the other(s) or group. This calls for creativity in constructing a win/win or maximum positive-sum outcome that may not have yet been imagined.[12]

In my experience, a frequent question that arises when discussing these modes is, "What is the real difference between compromising and collaborating?" The answer to this question is particularly important for the pastoral minister since it seems evident that collaboration is the highest goal of any well-functioning Christian congregation that is realizing its fundamental identity as the body of Christ. A common response to illustrate the difference between the two is to tell a version of this simple story.[13]

> Two children asked their mother for a lemon for something they wanted to make. But, the mother had only one lemon. This gave rise to a conflict between the children over who would get the lemon. A compromise would mean that the mother would cut the lemon in half and give each child an equal portion. But, instead, the mother asked her children what they wanted to do with the lemon. One responded, "I want to make lemonade, and my recipe calls for the *juice* of one lemon." The other answered, "I want to make a cake, and my recipe calls for the *zest* of one

lemon." And so, each child was able to have exactly what they needed using the one lemon.

This is collaboration. The story illustrates how conflict, when well understood and discerned, can open the way for creative, productive responses.

Together, the five conflict-handling modes provide a comprehensive view of the dynamics at play when conflict arises. It is important to realize that although collaboration is the ideal mode—especially for a Christian community—and the only maximum win/win conflict response, each of the modes can represent either a healthy or unhealthy response depending upon circumstances and context. For example, if tempers are riding high, intentionally avoiding conflict until participants have a chance to calm themselves and resume constructive conversation may be a wise, healthy choice. Similarly, someone may make a generous and gracious choice to accommodate another by being able to say to the person or group with whom they are competing, "I realize that this is far more important to you than it is to me. I think it would be better if we do it your way." Competing to have one's way may be desirable if it is a choice made to prevent harm to someone or to stand up for an important moral principle. And, at times, compromise is the best choice that can be made in a difficult situation.

Healthy agreements and disagreements are marked by respectful, intentional choices rather than angry reactions. Listening to understand plus empathy and compassion fuel the desire to create and act on collaborative solutions that strengthen relationships and build community. On the other hand, unhealthy agreements and disagreements are marked by reactions such as aggression, domination, fearful avoidance, a lack of empathy, and poor listening. Being able to distinguish healthy from unhealthy agreements and disagreements is key to working effectively with this framework.

The Survey

Accompanying the five response modes is a survey developed by Thomas and Kilmann[14] that identifies which conflict-handling modes an individual or group prefers. Pastoral ministers can use this tool with individuals, couples and families, committees, councils, and other groups to build self-awareness and strengthen relationships that promote discerning choices for healthy responses to conflict. As with most psychometric tools, this survey is designed to assess *preference*, not ability. Thomas and Kilmann explain:

> Each of us is capable of using all five conflict-handling modes. None of us can be characterized as having a single style of dealing with conflict. But certain people use some modes better than others and, therefore, tend to rely on those modes more heavily than others—whether because of temperament or practice.[15]

It is important for pastoral leaders to be self-aware of their own preferences for conflict response so they can avoid slipping into conflict-handling modes that may not be healthy for them and their communities. For example, an Australian researcher noticed that "the tendency of ministers to avoid conflict, to compromise and to be peacemakers exacerbates the stress caused by unclear boundaries and unresolved issues resulting from avoided conflict."[16] If a pastoral leader has a preference for avoiding conflict, then self-awareness of this preference allows them to intentionally discern and choose other conflict-handing modes that are more appropriate and productive in specific situations.

A Pastoral Intern's Experience

The five conflict-handling modes provide a comprehensive framework that pastoral ministers can use with their congregations when tensions and disagreements arise. The survey can also be used to identify the preferred conflict-handling modes of the congregants, which strengthens intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. If a group of congregants is in conflict, the pastoral leader can use the Thomas-Kilmann theory and survey to help everyone better understand conflict and its potential to lead to creative, productive responses. It can help the group identify the conflict dynamics in play, increase compassion, and develop greater appreciation of their diversity, as well as consciously choose to move towards conflict-handing modes that promote healthy, creative responses.

Allow me to share the experience of one of my students as an example of this theory and survey at work in pastoral ministry. Stephen was a seminarian whose pastoral internship was in a congregation in conflict about how to proceed with a project involving expensive major renovations of their worship space. Committee meetings were constantly deadlocked by two competing opinions. One group wanted to preserve the original church building as much as possible. They represented mostly long-time congregants who valued the history of the building highly; some had donated

pews and other decor in memory of loved ones and were incensed at the prospect of too much change. The other group wanted to make the worship space much more modern. They believed this would attract new congregants and saw the other group as "stuck" and unimaginative because they did not agree. Stephen had also noticed a committee member who remained silent and disengaged as the loudest of the voices battled on and another who sided with whoever seemed to be winning the argument. The committee was making very little progress, and Stephen found the meetings stressful and exhausting. Two of the members had approached him privately to confide that they were thinking of resigning.

When we worked with the Thomas-Kilmann theory and survey in class, Stephen decided he would take the instrument to his pastor and ask if the two of them might use it to try to help the committee move towards more healthy responses to their conflict. His pastor agreed, and the two of them created a plan. Stephen described what they did. First, Stephen shared the diagram of the five modes of conflict response and explained the modes to the committee. Then, he invited the members to use the framework to describe what was going on during their meetings. The competing dynamic was clearly identified, and Stephen and the pastor asked everyone to consider whether this mode was operating as a healthy or unhealthy conflict response in their group. They all agreed to listen carefully—with the desire to understand—as members explained why they wanted to have their way. Then, they asked if anyone could identify any other modes at play. Both accommodation and avoidance were identified in the group as well. Discussion revealed that these were not healthy responses. Rather, they were fearful reactions to the aggression in the committee's interactions.

The next time the committee met, Stephen invited them to complete the survey to find out which conflict-handling modes the members preferred. It was not surprising when the survey results suggested that the member who was most incensed and vocal about the prospect of change preferred a competing conflict response. And, he freely shared with the committee that he knows that he likes to win an argument. However, it was a surprise to discover that the person most insistent on modernizing the worship space actually preferred a compromising response to conflict. Stephen described how, as the discussion of this continued, it became clear that he was using a competing response style because he felt that it was the only way he would be heard. The survey also revealed that the most silent member preferred

avoiding conflict. She shared that negative experiences of conflict when she was young left her feeling uneasy, even fearful, when someone began dominating and speaking aggressively. The committee members were able to appreciate her vulnerability and to realize that the dynamics were making it difficult for her to participate in their discussions. Similarly, this member recognized that her response was not healthy and began to consciously work to contribute to the conversation.

Stephen and his pastor were grateful for the committee members' growing awareness of the conflict dynamics at work among them and the ways their preferred conflict-handling modes were contributing to unhealthy responses. As Stephen explained, "It wasn't magic," but working with the framework and the survey on several occasions gave the committee a framework for identifying and discussing what was going on and a way to decide together whether they could find a way to move into a healthier response mode that would help them reach their goals. They all agreed that moving towards collaboration, or at least compromise, was the right thing to do, not only for the renovation project but also for the integrity of their Christian community life. Interestingly, Stephen reported that he thought the committee member who had been silent had the most impact on the group moving forward. She began to "find her voice" as she consciously chose to engage in the discussions and others gave her the room to speak. She offered some creative suggestions for compromising between maintaining the established worship space and incorporating some modern decor that helped the members come to some solutions. Stephen could see a gradual shift in the committee from reactions to intentional choices of healthy responses.

A Process For Pastoral Ministers
In Moving Towards Healthy Conflict Responses

Stephen's experience during his pastoral internship presents a foundation for a useful process for pastoral ministers to use to help their congregations move towards healthy conflict responses. The process can be summarized by these seven steps:

1. Promote a shift in perspective from an interpretation of conflict as inherently negative and bad to a view of conflict as having the potential to be a source of creativity, growth, and change.

2. Present the Thomas-Kilmann theory and use it as a framework for identifying the conflict dynamics that are at work.

3. Complete the survey and discuss the results. Encourage appreciation of diversity in preferences and the gift of self-awareness, discuss how each mode can be used in a healthy manner, and practice compassion and forgiveness for vulnerabilities and mistakes. Work together to make intentional choices for healthy conflict responses for individuals, teams, committees, and groups. Remember that collaboration is the goal of a Christian community (or any healthy religious community).

4. Discuss the fact that whereas unhealthy disagreements may seem obvious, there are also unhealthy agreements that render relationships static. Both disagreements and agreements can also be healthy. Talk about how to discern whether conflict is healthy or unhealthy.

5. Encourage congregants to recognize their agency to choose healthy conflict-handling modes. For the most part, these choices determine whether conflict destroys or builds.

6. Return to the theory as often as needed as a framework for identifying and discussing conflict dynamics and choosing healthy responses.

7. Discuss and celebrate progress towards healthy conflict responses.

A Theology for Healthy Conflict Response

There are many instances where Christian theology shares common language with the theory and survey presented in this article and I would like to mention two: collaboration and diversity. Drawing on the Thomas-Kilmann theory to move towards healthy conflict responses invites the pastoral minister to consider the communion in diversity that Saint Paul defines as the body of Christ:

> Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If all were a single member, where would the body be? . . . As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." . . . If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Corinthians 12:14, 20–21, 26–27, NRSV)

Paul describes the many diverse individual members and the tensions that arise in the Christian community. And the function of this tension is clear; it is to unite and build up the body, not destroy it.

This is a strong encouragement for pastoral ministers to embrace the tensions of diversity and disagreement that arise in their congregations with the confidence that working to help congregants appreciate diversity and move towards healthy responses—in particular, collaborative conflict-handling modes—realizes the highest objective of the Christian community: to build up "the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27).

APPENDIX I

Conflict Resolution Styles Survey
Based on the Thomas-Kilmann Model

Source: Daniel Levi, "Managing Conflict," in Daniel Levi, *Group Dynamics for Teams*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications), 141–42. Used with permission.

Note that in this variation, the term "confrontation" is used instead of "competition."

Purpose: Understand your preferred style for dealing with conflicts. There are five basic approaches for dealing with conflicts: avoidance, accommodation, confrontation, compromise, and collaboration. The style that you prefer depends on how assertive you are about getting what you want and how much you value your relationship with the other participants.

Directions: Use the following scale to indicate the amount of your agreement with each of the following statements about how you deal with conflict.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree

_____ 1. I try to avoid stating my opinion in order not to create disagreements.

_____ 2. When there is a disagreement, I try to satisfy the needs of the other people involved.

_____ 3. I use my influence to get my position accepted by others.

_____ 4. I try to find the middle course to resolve differences.

_____ 5. I try to discuss an issue with others to find a solution acceptable to all of us.

_____ 6. I keep my opinions to myself if they disagree with others' opinions.

_____ 7. I usually go along with the desires of others in a conflict situation.

_____ 8. I am usually firm about advocating my side of an issue.

_____ 9. When I negotiate, I usually win some and lose some.

_____ 10. I like to work with others to find solutions to a problem that satisfy everyone.

_____ 11. I try to avoid disagreements with others.

_____ 12. I often go along with the recommendations of others in a conflict.

_____ 13. I stick to my position during a conflict.

_____ 14. I negotiate openly with others so that a compromise can be reached.

_____ 15. To resolve a conflict, I try to blend the ideas of all of the people involved.

Scoring

Add questions 1, 6, and 11 to obtain your Avoidance score.

Add questions 2, 7, and 12 to obtain your Accommodation score.

Add questions 3, 8, and 13 to obtain your Confrontation score.

Add questions 4, 9, and 14 to obtain your Compromise score.

Add questions 5, 10, and 15 to obtain your Collaboration score.

Note: Did you have a preferred conflict resolution style? What would encourage you to be more collaborative? How do you deal with people who use a different style of conflict resolution?

NOTES

1   Although I am writing this article from my Christian perspective and educational context, I believe the model and ideas I present are applicable to any religious congregation.

2   Daniel Levi, "Managing Conflict," in *Group Dynamics for Teams*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013), 126.

3   Nina Brown, *Facilitating Challenging Groups: Leaderless, Open and Single-Session Groups* (New York: Routledge Publishing, Taylor and Frances Group, 2014), 50.

4   Levi, "Managing Conflict," 126.

5   John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation: Clear Articulation of the Guiding Principles by a Pioneer in the Field* (Wilmington, DE: Good Books, Skyhorse Publishing, 2014), 9.

6   Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 9.

7   Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer, "Awareness-Based Action Research: Catching Social Reality Creation in Flight," in Hilary Bradbury, ed., *Action Research*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015), 201.

8   Levi, "Managing Conflict," 129.

9   Deanna F. Womack, "Assessing the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Survey," *Management Communication Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1988): 321.

10   See Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Killman, "Interpersonal Conflict-Handling Behavior as Reflections of Jungian Personality Dimension," *Psychological Reports* 37 (1975): 971–80. The authors also acknowledge the Mouton-Blake grid and the theory of cooperative and distributive dimensions of conflict as seminal.

11   T. Khun and M. S. Pool, "Do Conflict Management Styles Affect Group Decision Making?" *Human Communication Research* 26, no. 4 (2000): 558–90.

12   See the Kilmann Diagnostics website at http://www.kilmanndiagnostics.com/catalog/thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument for a comprehensive explanation of this theory.

13   See, for example, a version of this story at the website of Leadership Crossroads, http://www.leadershipcrossroads.com/arti_jac.asp, accessed March 2019.

14   An abbreviated variation based on the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Instrument is attached as appendix I. The complete original Thomas-Kilmann Instrument (TKI) is available from the Kilmann Diagnostics website, http://www.kilmanndiagnostics.com/catalog/thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument, accessed March 2019.

15   Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann, "An Overview of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument," Kilmann Diagnostics, http://www.kilmanndiagnostics.com, accessed February 2019.

16   Nigel D. Pegram, *Emotional Intelligence and the Prevention of Ministry Burnout* (D.Min. thesis, Tabor College, Adelaide, Australia, 2015), 8.