

New Places for New People

Starting new Christian
communities:
A practical guide

Chapter 17

Positive Working
Together and
Managing
Conflict

Positive Working Together and Managing Conflict

In human relationships, conflict is to be expected, especially when people are experiencing change. The space to differ honestly in an atmosphere of grace and acceptance is the mark of a healthy community. Conflict becomes destructive when it is hidden, unresolved, or responded to in a way that distances people from one another and produces damaging behaviour.

Experience shows that there have been tensions between pioneer projects and the wider Church. This is to be expected, for one of the gifts of New People for New Places (NPNP) is that they can challenge assumptions about the way Christian community is expressed. Throughout the history of the Church, when new people have encountered the gospel, there have been tensions between what was established and what was emerging. It is in these moments that wise people have enabled the honest sharing of different perspectives for the good of the whole Church. A helpful Methodist Church resource is *Living with contradictory convictions* (see 'Further resources').

Ready for conflict

As you begin your NPNP project, it is important that you are ready for the conflict that is likely to arise and that you find patterns of handling it positively. This will enable difference to be a place of creativity that brings about growth and deepening of relationships: a moment that helps an NPNP be understood and integrated in the life of the wider church context. Here are some helpful procedures to put in place:

- Normalise practices that help greater numbers of people share in community conversations. Encourage people to speak up, and support those who find it more challenging to speak. Sometimes this requires not speaking so that others have a chance to share.
- In situations where someone raises a conflict, be ready to listen to what the person wishes to share. To be heard is sometimes all someone needs.
- Do not look for immediate solutions or fixes. It is better to gather information and enable conversation that will bring people together.
- Try to facilitate different people to work together in their tension rather than keep them apart.
- Enable mutual accountability: where both a project and the wider church understand the importance of what is required of them and what is required of others to support them.
- Enable consistently good communication between key wider church leaders and the pioneering team. This is vital in preventing tensions from escalating. A small reflection shared early on in a healthy flow of communication means an issue won't become bigger than it needs to.



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- Acknowledge differences and affirm the value of people's perspectives to create a place where honest questions can be asked and answered.

Positive working together

Dealing well with conflict is not easy and many feel overwhelmed by the prospect. However, the skills can be learnt, and the Methodist Church is committed to empowering leaders in this area. The *Positive Working Together* resources provide information and training to equip leaders in every context of the Methodist Church.

One session that is particularly important is 'Growing through Change and Conflict'. It focuses on exploring your 'conflict style' (how you respond in difficult or tense situations), how conflict can escalate in a church context, and what tools and techniques can be used to de-escalate conflict.

Further resources

Living with contradictory convictions:

www.methodist.org.uk/conferencereports2006

Downloads and information on training events:

www.methodist.org.uk/positiveworkingtogether

or contact your local Learning Network team.