

Conference Minister's Corner

A Couple Resources for Dealing with Conflama (Conflict + Drama)

By Rev. Amy S. Zimbelman

If you frequent a church, you will never find a shortage of conflict and drama (a.k.a. conflama). As I like to say: Where two or three are gathered in his name, there Jesus is with them, and there's Conflama too: also attempting to pull up a chair.

Conflict and/or drama arise from this: the GAP between what we want and what the reality currently is.

This gap could be a gap of resources (between what we have and what we need), expectations (what we hope would happen and what is happening), vision (where we are and where we're headed, as in a pastoral search), knowledge (what we know and what we need to know), etc.

This gap creates energy. That energy can lead to productive conflict. The word *conflict* is from a Latin word that joins the prefix *con* meaning "with/together," and the verb *fligere*, which means "to strike." To be in conflict is "to strike together." It looks like people/churches working together to solve problems in healthy ways.

OR this gap can lead to drama, which is unproductive and sucks the life out of people. Instead of striking together, drama involves striking at others involved in the situation, or even at one's self.

But how do we do conflict well rather than create painful, unproductive, and unnecessary drama? Here are a couple resources I've discovered recently to help answer this question:

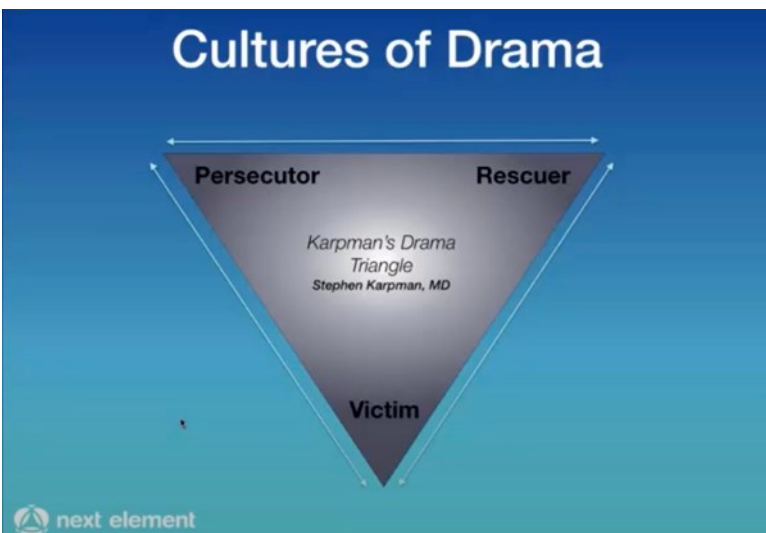
Conflict Without Casualties, using the Drama Triangle

In the spring, MC USA brought in trainers to educate Conference Ministers, Moderators, and other leaders in this *Conflict Without Casualties* curriculum as a precursor to the Kansas City delegate session. And I must admit: I was skeptical at first. It seemed too simple. But as I started analyzing conflicts in our churches and personal conflicts in my life through the lens of the Drama Triangle, I realized that there's a lot to be learned from this framework.



"The purpose of conflict is to create."

-MICHAEL MEADE



The training asked some self-assessment questions:

- Do you ever lose patience with people who aren't as committed as you?
- Do you do things for people even when they don't ask for help?
- Do you avoid sharing your feelings about a situation because it'll just cause more problems?
- Do you find yourself saying: "Ergh! If only they would do things *my way*, we wouldn't be in this mess!"
- Do you take negative feedback as a sign of personal rejection?
- Do you choose compromise to avoid conflict?

Those of us who can say Yes to *any* of those may be experiencing drama rather than healthy conflict.

If you're curious to learn more, here's a brief [explanation of the Drama Triangle](#) (originally created by Stephen Karman) to introduce the concept.

And here's an hour-long [Conflict Without Casualties webinar](#) (start at 3:25—the first minutes are just introductions for webinar participants). It's led by Nate Regier, the Co-Founder and CEO of Next Element, the organization MC USA contracted with for the training. Nate has a Mennonite background.

This training explains the Drama Triangle and then how to respond to conflict with compassionate accountability rather than engaging in drama.

Is this video a little awkward because you're listening in on another group's webinar? Yes. Are there some helpful insights anyway? Yes.

If you watch the training, a couple disclaimers I would give: the word "victim" here is referring to a victim *mentality* and not referring to someone experiencing bullying, abuse, or oppression. In other words, this training is about interpersonal conflict between respectful parties and does not really apply to situations like intimate partner violence.

Also, implementing their compassionate conflict approach may or may not change others involved in a situation, but it can potentially prevent you from getting sucked in to unhealthy drama. It's helped me to better analyze certain personalities and situations. I'd be curious to know if you find it helpful as well.

Peaceful Practices Curriculum: A guide to healthy communication in conflict from Mennonite Central Committee

This new resource can be downloaded for FREE [here: https://mcc.org/peaceful-practices](https://mcc.org/peaceful-practices) or mailed to you (for \$5).

Peaceful Practices can be used as a standalone curriculum, or it could be incorporated into another discussion. For instance, if you're leading a Sunday School class on a controversial topic, the prayers, illustrations, or scriptural reflections from this curriculum could help frame your conversation each week.

Some of my favorite parts are:

—The Ladder of Inference shows how observable data around us eventually moves up the ladder to become our actions (page 53).

—The difference between dialogue and debate. Dialogue's goal is to understand one's self and others better, whereas Debate's goal is the successful argument of a person's position over that of their opponent. Dialogue listens to strengths to affirm and learn; Debate listens for weaknesses to discount and devalue. Dialogue honors silence; Debate uses silence to gain advantage, etc. (page 41).

—Different ways to structure a group process, i.e., the well-known circle process where a talking piece is passed around a circle, the fishbowl process where only an inner circle can speak while an outside circle listens, the world café, the Samoan circle, the circle of allies, etc. (page 74).

—The blessings from Jan Richardson at the end of each chapter.

Michael Meade says, "The purpose of conflict is to create." And so my prayer is that the churches in Mountain States would use our "gaps" not to engage in painful drama, but to do conflict well—creating live-giving ways of being and serving together.

