

Creative conflict

by [Carl S. Dudley](#) in the [Oct 25, 2000](#) issue

*Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life*, by Penny Edgell Becker

Conflict is killing us," a frustrated denominational executive explained. "We take years to build up a congregation, and boom! We lose the best members in a firestorm we can't control. In fact," he confided, "the vast majority of our churches are carrying hidden conflicts that could explode at any time. As a church leader, half your job is fighting fires. Some you can see, but others are smoldering just below the surface."

Penny Edgell Becker offers a fresh alternative for fire fighters in the church. She transforms conflict from a disruptive threat that needs to be contained into an analytical window through which to see new potential. She changes conflict from an enemy into a primary tool for congregational awareness, leadership and mobilization. Her approach enables leaders to redirect the hot energy of hostility into a self-understanding that uses conflict constructively.

Becker's book surprised even its author. As a sociologist she did not expect to use conflict as her primary lens, and as a professional social scientist she did not intend to write a book so directly useful to religious practitioners. In her initial plunge into the study of congregations, she relied on standard sociological approaches until she realized that the primary tools of her trade did not adequately explain what she was experiencing. Becker shares her struggle to move away from well-known frames of analysis, such as liberal-conservative theology or hierarchical-egalitarian leadership, and to look more carefully at congregational behavior under pressure. Throughout her 231 interviews in 23 congregations drawn from 15 denominations (Protestant, Roman Catholic and Jewish) she turns her primary attention to "the norms of interaction that, taken together, form the overall tenor of congregational life."

Becker lifts up "the congregation's whole pattern of conflict, including what issues people fight over, how they frame those issues, the typical process by which conflict plays out and is resolved, how serious or divisive conflicts are, and what effect they

have on the congregation in the long run." She proposes four congregational models that she calls "House of Worship," "Church as Family," "Congregation as Community" and "Congregation as Leader."

In the house-of-worship model, the congregation is so focused on worship and education that even social relationships are comparatively neglected. Church-as-family congregations add to worship and education an emphasis on the social satisfactions that come to people from caring for one another, especially in extended family networks. The congregation-as-community model refers to religious bodies that are so concerned with racial diversity and democratic participation that they reach decisions very slowly, if at all. Finally, the members of leader congregations agree that the whole congregation should be a voice for and active agent of morality in the social, economic and political issues facing their community.

Although these models have a familiar ring, they generate unexpected insights. We may not be surprised that every congregational model includes an emphasis on worship and education, but it still comes as a shock to discover that house-of-worship congregations are so committed to these two core tasks that they suppress "mission creep," i.e., the addition of program priorities that others (including denominational officials) believe to be essential. We may need to be reminded that in the family model the lay leaders often make and implement decisions outside of the formal church structure (sometimes even without consulting the pastor). We may be unaware that the community model's absolute commitment to diversity and full participation in membership and governance often stalls decisions and exhausts leaders. In short, the model of inclusive congregations with facilitator-leaders--clearly the dominant model discussed in mainline church literature--has real weaknesses.

Becker adds two essential qualifications. First, these models are not exclusive categories, but are based on images that energize congregations. Although a single model often dominates a congregation (she found primary models in 19 of the 23 she studied), she devotes a full chapter to the congregations that embrace more than one model, since they frequently experience a unique kind of conflict "between frames." Second, these models grow out of congregations' social context and religious heritage. In her study, this context was Oak Park, Illinois, which she describes as a predominately white, liberal, middle-class suburb of Chicago. Thus Becker expects to find that significantly different images shape churches in other locations, such as an African-American community. She provides a fresh look at

patterns of congregational life that were previously unseen or considered unimportant.

Through her lens, we discover that images that shape ritual and style of worship also make a significant difference in the informal, even mundane, conversations among members. These four models define the characteristics of those who become group leaders--both lay and clergy. Through the "bundle of values" associated with each model, we can read the social messages that begin when we drive into the parking lot, are greeted before worship and listen to the announcements. We can anticipate significant differences in after-worship coffee hours, in the issues congregations discuss and in the aspects of each they emphasize. These frames enable us to feel differences, from the choice of music and how it is presented, to the hidden criteria by which newcomers are absorbed and find their place in the life of the congregation.

Becker's models show that congregations treat conflict distinctively, not only in the topics upon which they focus, but in the kinds of logic to which they appeal. Each congregation's way of processing conflict reflects the moral and theological imperative at its core. Thus Becker is able to identify the activities that are most likely to trigger conflict in each kind of congregation and the most likely patterns for conflict resolution. Through the alchemy of social analysis, she transforms conflict from an almost universal threat to congregations into a user-friendly tool for better understanding.

Though *Congregations in Conflict* was not written as a handbook on conflict resolution, Becker's approach works. A church leader in Oak Park claims, "Using this has saved our church--now it is mandatory reading for our board." A newly relocated pastor in New England asks, "Why didn't I have this in my last parish?" Although she writes with great clarity, Becker's book remains solidly sociological, concluding with a section that brings her work into the current debates of her profession. Even in her most theoretical material, the kinds of issues she confronts (blurred boundaries between public and private, declining social capital, increasingly disconnected individuals) continue to challenge clergy as well as social scientists.