THE RELATIONSHIP CYCLE IN PARISHES

1. Create & Negotiate Relationships
How: Information exchange, establishing shared expectations, creating adequate trust. Who: a visitor, possible new rector in a parish transition, person seeking to join a choir or working group

Acceptance of New Realities

Creating the relationship

In the System
+ Structures & processes to channel, test and set priorities
+ Leader's willingness to hear new information
+ Trust in the system

In the People
+ Awareness of the new hope, vision, pain
+ Assertiveness in addressing issues

2. Agreement
Get baptized, join the parish, be offered and accept being the rector. May have the quality of a convent or a contractual relationship

"Go Back"
(Fantasy)

3. Stability
Relationship in balance, adequate satisfaction, reasonable productivity. Also, a sense that in this parish we find God in the relationships and patterns of life.

Green lines

Conflict cycle

4. "The Rub"
Emergence of new hopes, visions, opportunities, problems, expectations

5. Process of Planned Change and Negotiation
+ An Improvement Process

OR

A Conflict Management Process – for lower level conflicts

Anxiety/Denial/Avoidance

Continue the fight

Withdrawal

Uncertainty Anxiety

6. "BLOW OUT"

Termination of Relationship

May take the form of a major parish conflict – "the big blow out" – an event that everyone will recall many years later. Or, may be a series of small irruptions, the cumulative effect of which is the same as a major conflict. Or may involve just a few central people.
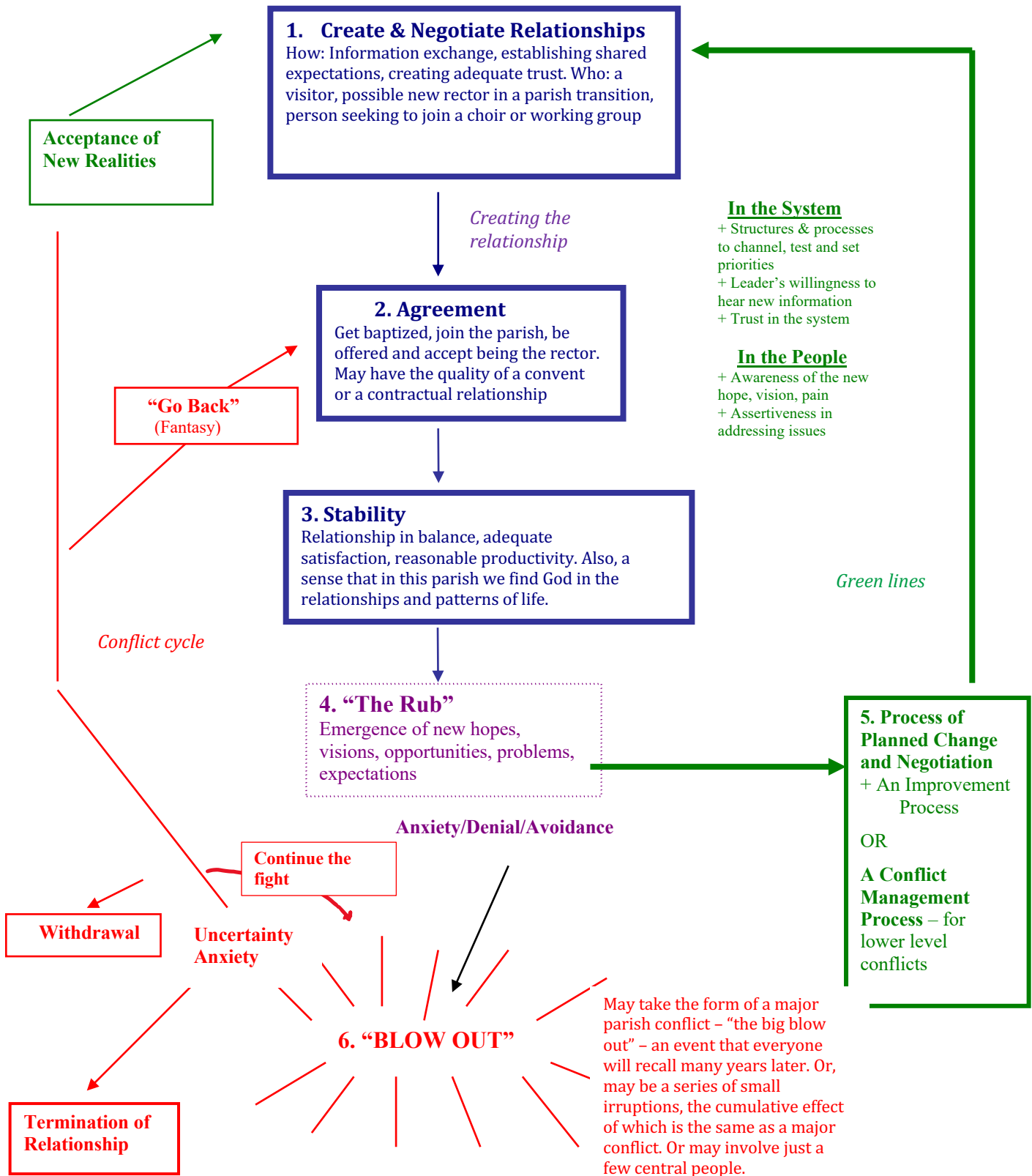
THE RELATIONSHIP CYCLE IN PARISHES

The Relationship Cycle in Parishes is a tool with the following purposes:

• To assess conflict causes and dynamics
• To understand the function of structures and processes that facilitate a parish's adaptation to
  new external or internal forces
• To understand the function of structures and processes that allow the organization to make use
  of new ideas and visions, problems and pain, which are carried by parishioners.
• To create in a parish a "common language," a set of concepts, skills and norms,
  that allows people more effectively to work out their life together.

All relationships in parishes can be seen as going through five stages. These stages seem to hold true between priest and the lay leadership, the priest and individual parishioners, and the individual or family and the whole parish. The cycle can be used in regard to the whole parish system as well as sub-systems. The same stages are present in forming a new parish working group, guild or committee.

There are three primary cycles
1. Creating the relationship (blue)
2. Maintaining a healthy and faithful relationship (green lines)
3. A conflict cycle (red)

Creating the relationship

Stage 1: Create and Negotiate Relationships

Three different parishes. Thomas and Brion are looking for a parish to join. Mother Jane Marie is one of three priests being considered to become the Vicar of St. James Parish. Lauren was asked to be on the vestry at St. Mary's. Each is beginning a relationship involving a number of other people, an institutional role, and a new expression of the sacramental life.

Beginning and changing relationships in the parish always involve the exchange of information about what is hoped for and expected in the relationship. All parties are each seeking and providing information in the process. This sharing of what is wanted and hoped for by each person, and the corporate bodies of parish, search committee, and vestry, continues until they achieve, or fail to achieve, a mutual acceptance. This initial acceptance is simply "enough for now," enough to move forward together. Thomas and Brion want a parish that is accepting of gay couples, has a professional level choir, and is committed to justice. Mother Jane Marie was seeking a university related parish, with the possibility that her husband might secure a faculty appointment, and a position she might be able stay in for the next ten years and then retire. Saint James is looking for an excellent liturgist with the ability to deliver skilled spiritual guidance and insightful preaching. They had also begun to see a significant increase in the Sunday average

attendance. The vestry wanted a priest that could continue to advance that trend. Lauren is willing to serve and based on her past experience believes that being on the vestry won't take up too much of her time. She has a demanding position as an associate in a city law firm.

In this stage all the possibly useful information that might be shared is not going to be shared. The parties involved don't really know all that might be relevant information to some future issue. There is also frequently information that is hidden or suppressed as each party focuses on making a favorable impression on the other. In any case, there is never enough time to say and explore all that we might.

Stage 2: Agreement

Agreement(s) emerge out of Stage One's work. They may be informal understandings or written contracts. The depth of commitment will depend on the nature of the relationship. The longer term, more complex and central the relationship, the stronger the commitment needed for the relationship to function effectively. The two laymen have felt welcomed after attending for three months and have transferred their membership. The priest was asked to become vicar and had signed a letter of agreement with the Bishop and the vestry. And Lauren was elected to the vestry but was caught off guard when she learned that vestry members were expected to attend a weekend vestry leadership retreat in two months

Psychological contracts

Psychological contract refers to the unwritten, often unspoken "contract." It's some basic "need" or "want." It may be an understood norm of behavior or attitude or it may be in the form of a less than conscious desire. In the parish church there are two primary expressions: 1) between the individual member, or group of members, and the parish as a whole, 2) between the individual member, or group of members, or parish as a whole, and the priest. When it is broken, someone is likely to become quite upset. Often this isn't voiced; and if it is spoken about, its expression may seem unclear to others, even to those most upset. At times the expression will take the form of attacks that have little direct relationship to the "contract" that has been broken. It may way of acting out the felt, if inarticulate, discontent. If you are new to the parish, whether as member of priest, you may only discover some psychological contracts after you have broken them.

In Episcopal parishes we tend to develop such agreements especially around liturgy and music, the relationship with the priest, and/or the "feel" of the parish community. Smaller numbers of people may be seeking agreements around matters such as an orientation toward social justice and/or service, the historical legacy of the parish and its building, or doctrinal stance.

Keep the concept of psychological contracts in mind as you continue to read about the Relationship Cycle. The relationship's stability is largely dependent on stable psychological contracts. "Rubs" and "Blow Outs" are often related to our psychological contracts. And the parish's ability to improve its work and life depends on effective processes of planned change, conflict management and reconciliation.

Stage 3: Stability

Frequently the result of an initial agreement is a "honeymoon" period. People give each other the assumption of good intentions. Judgments are postponed. Everyone feels "accepted." Though it's the kind of acceptance that is based on not knowing much about one another, not having experienced what each routinely avoids sharing, and not having suffered the fifth time of having your name forgotten by that nice warden. But we're all adults. Right? We can navigate these things.

While the relationship is in a state of relative stability or equilibrium, there is more likely to be a sense of satisfaction between participants and a positive energy that shows itself in parish life and work.

The Benedictine value of stability is expressed and felt. If the liturgy is done as expected, the priest isn't all that annoying, and there are a few people who engage in personal relationship in a comfortable manner—all is well. The more apostolic among us will also have a sense that others have found God in these relationships and this pattern of life; and so will we.

If the parish attends to incorporation as an ongoing dynamic stability is more likely to be reliable. So, Thomas and Brion get themselves connect to a few others and join the adult foundations course. Mother Jane Marie involves the wardens in a process of increased two-way information flow in the parish, including an early check in on how things are developing between her and the parish. And Lauren has become a respected member of the vestry team seeking to restore the old chapel so it can be used for the daily office and mid-week celebrations of the Eucharist.

Maintaining a healthy and faithful relationship

Stage 4: "The Rub"

Eventually, all relationships experience forces that unsettle their equilibrium. The forces may come from sources external to the parish (e.g., national or regional social and economic trends), or may rise from new hopes or concerns among participants in the Eucharistic community. Relationships are put under pressure by such forces and, if they are to maintain an adequate level of stability, must address the new situation.

Previously unspoken or unheard wishes will have become more pressing. New dreams and expectations emerge. The parish gets a new priest and also a new musician that aren't as competent in liturgy and music. Which was one of your "big" reasons for attending. The parish is facing financial problems and is considering cutting the rector's salary or number of days working. The wardens go to a conference on the spiritual life and see new possibilities for the parish's life.

All these "rubs' can bring new life and energy to the parish. The parish's level of Christian proficiency and wisdom will largely determine whether it is new life and increased harmony or decline and division.

There's also a need to accept that conflict is often how any system moves toward a greater truth and justice. Saul Alinsky wrote, "Change means movement. Movement means friction. Only in the frictionless vacuum of a nonexistent abstract world can movement or change occur without that abrasive friction of conflict." The conflict itself is often a means of growth in the Christian life for individuals and parishes—"God's love is too great to be confined to any one side of a conflict." Bishop Desmond Tutu.

For the response to be new life and harmony parishes need to have enough experience, training, and wisdom in their culture to automatically move into the processes of planned change, negotiation, and conflict management. Which is to say, that the organizational culture that has developed over many years will show itself when significant rubs emerge. We have as much maturity, skill and wisdom as we have at that moment. One ascetical insight that may help us grasp the dynamic is how wisdom develops in a person or system. Most of us realize that it's not something that can be conjured in the moment of crisis. Richard Holloway, one-time Presiding Bishop of Scotland, thought that wisdom was the coming together of the other six gifts of the Holy Spirit. This spiritual maturity comes forward when there is a synthesis, and integration, of awe, piety, the capacity to accept paradox, courage, an openness to the Holy Spirit, and the gift of seeing rightly.

Failure to come to terms with these forces may cause a "festering" that takes those involved into a "Blow Out," a high level of conflict (in Speed Leas Levels of Conflict model – level 4 and 5 conflict, also at times a high level 3). Leaders may avoid facing into the growing frustration or take actions to control and suppress the disagreement and end up only adding to the tension. The church's norms regarding conflict and reconciliation offer the wisdom of Scriptures, tradition and reason. All too often rectors and wardens fail to engage in the work of contemplation, intercession and action that can lead to the parish's growth on holiness of life.

To pick up on our examples: Thomas and Brion had a significant "rub" when Brion wrote an article for the newsletter on the lack of transparency in the parish. The rector and the editor refused to publish it. The dispute escalated into a "Blow Out" (see Stage 6 below). Mother Jane Marie found that the rapid growth being experienced at St. James was making her anxious. She feared that she didn't have the competence or the energy to deal with a growing parish. She had assumed that the growth spurt would end and was uncomfortable when that didn't happen. Lauren's work on the chapel team had a rub when they split half-and-half over whether to ask the vestry to provide 20,000 for improvements or to launch a capital fund drive to raise $100,000 for a total renovation. In the cases of Mother Jane Marie and Lauren there was a process of planned change and conflict management (Stage 5- Green Lines).

Stage 5: Process of Planned Change and Negotiation

Self-renegotiation

Most of the parish's harmony is maintained as people deal with the rubs they experience by self-negotiating.

It does matter if that self-negotiating process is in response to the Holy Spirit or simply a temperamental inclination to avoid the discomfort of speaking up. Discernment which includes a sense of proportion and perspective, along with a bit of humility, is how we faithfully move to internally decide to "let-it-go" or to speak, even at the risk of conflict.

We make such decisions and act upon them, by internal renegotiation, or along the "green lines" of reconciliation and planned change, or into the conflict cycle.

The person or group manages it themselves. They decide it really is not worth the trouble of having the parish address it or that it is something that is best handled in a manner that doesn't involve the parish.

The Church's norms for conflict and reconciliation

Knowing the church's norms of reconciliation and conflict management will help us in making such decisions—timely and quickly, face-to-face with those directly involved, involve others if face-to-face fails, forgive.

Scripture is abundant—do not let the sun go down on your anger; come to terms quickly with your accuser; forgive seventy-seven times. Tradition also guides us— "being ready to forgive those who have offended you, in order that you yourselves may be forgiven"; "If then we pray the Lord to forgive us, we also ought to forgive." The methods of conflict management—it's easier to address disagreements when they are low level conflict; match the level of conflict with the strategy being used

The process

The "rub" is brought into the organization's "process of planned change and negotiation.

This stage happens best in a parish that operates on the assumption that "rubs" will be a frequent, inevitable and useful. With that understanding, the parish can establish structures, processes, a climate, and resources that enable it to hear and engage the "rubs." The need is to create and maintain ways of gathering and interpreting information, planning and responding appropriately to the diagnosis we make, and continuing to evaluate the outcome of the action taken. The organization needs ways of doing this in relation to external social and wider organizational forces and shifts from within the organization.

This approach to managing organizational change can keep the system in touch with itself and its environment, create a "demand system" for continuous improvement, help negotiate differences, and prevent the development of high conflict levels.

Creating green lines in the parish

There are dozens of useful listening processes, methods for the management of low-level conflict, and planned change processes. The routine use of such methods can both establish a broad listening climate. If a parish uses 4 or 5 methods frequently people will develop some competence in how to participate.

We'd recommend parishes frequently use methods and processes such as: the testing process (a couple of times per year at coffee hour, 10 – 15 times during the year in vestry meetings); break-out groups (at least once in every vestry meeting and large congregational meeting, usually limited to 3 – 12 minutes), brainstorming and prioritizing processes at half the meetings in the parish; the Likes/Concerns/Wishes Process (at least once a year in the vestry and possibly with a larger parish meeting); a simply survey-feedback process in a couple of settings each year and a more elaborate process every couple of years; and a Channeling Process each year in the congregation and vestry that channels, identifies and moves, the "rubs" into a productive process.

You can find more description of these processes on our website www.CongregationalDevelopment.com in the "free documents section." Also, in the books—In *Your Holy Spirit: Shaping the Parish Through Spiritual Practice* and *Fill All Things: The Dynamics of Spirituality in the Parish Church*. We also have an upcoming book on models, methods and skills that will offer more detailed guidance.

Other processes that most parish will use less frequently include: a vestry working retreat each year; the use of an experienced parish development consultant on the retreat and every few years for a weekend or more in the congregation; and three parish community meetings each year (one that is an overall assessment and two others with a specific focus, e.g., liturgy and music, service ministries, internal community building, membership growth; the incorporation of new members.

Green lines

Why do we call this process "green lines?" I was working with a high school faculty in Maine. There was a high level of conflict between most of the faculty and the principal. I had them do an exercise. I shared the Relationship Cycle diagram with them. It was on large sheets of newsprint in the front of the room. Then I invited them to go forward and place a mark to indicate where they thought the school was in the cycle. The marks were almost all in the "rubs" or "Blow Out" areas of the cycle. Most of those involved were optimistic that there might be a positive outcome. Their work together that first day was seen as a good start by most (of 37 people using a 6 point scale, 25 thought the day "a good start". Another 7 rated in as 5.) As we debriefed the teachers kept referring to the "green lines"—"We don't have the green lines we need." Green lines between the administration and the faculty would help." It took me a minute to realize what they were

referring to. I had drawn the process of conflict management and reconciliation with a green marker.

The Conflict Cycle

Stage 6. A "Blow Out"

Brion objected to his article on transparency not being published in the newsletter. The rector suggested that he might be happier in another parish. Brion and Thomas asked to meet with the rector and a warden. The meeting took place but ended up with the rector repeating his unwillingness to use the article, his annoyance that Brion had written something that parish leaders hadn't requested, and again suggested that Brion and Thomas would be happier in another parish. The rector also told Thomas that there would be little sense for him to pursue his interest in ordination through the parish. He said he had spoken with, and receive support from, the Bishop. Thomas and Brion asked for a meeting that included the Bishop. They thought that the Bishop might be willing to play something of a mediator function. The rector and wardens saw it as an opportunity for the Bishop to reinforce their position. The meeting took place Thomas and Brion felt the Bishop only made a halfhearted effort to "listen."

Brion and Thomas found themselves on an emotional rollercoaster. They'd move from thinking they needed to leave the parish, to wondering about how it would be if they cut their pledge to thinking that maybe there was a way of still coming to terms with the rector. Their frustration and anger were such that they also considered ways to push harder on the parish leadership. They wondered about going to the news media, calling a meeting of sympathetic parishioners, and making a formal complaint against the rector.

This is the cycle likely to occur if the parish has an inadequate "process of planned change and negotiation," if that process fails in a particular situation, or if any of the parties has little sense of obedience in regard to the church's norms of reconciliation and conflict. "Rubs" may move in several directions:

The "rub" continues to be of concern to the person or group. There is likely to be frustration, anxiety and a festering of the "rub." It may be that the organization is unable or unwilling to effectively engage the concern, or it may be that those with the concern are caught up in their own cynicism, sense of victimization, and passivity.

If this is the path being taken, the drama may continue to build in the people and the parish system until there is a **"Blow Out**." That may take several shapes:

1. It may take the form of a public, very intense battle.
2. It might express itself in a series of smaller irruptions that end up having the same effect as a large "blow out."
3. It might be internalized in one or more parties and show itself in health problems or inappropriate behavior, i.e., there is a "blow in," the person takes the festering into themselves.

It is important for parish leaders to assess the situation:
- Does the "Blow Out" involve the whole system, critical subsystems, or influential people?
- Are there issues involving the parish's mission, vision, and core values?
- Is this an attempt to sabotage the parish's strategic direction?
- Is this an expression of "cynic, victim or bystander" behavior coming from people with a pattern of such behavior?
- Can those involved find enough humility to honestly enter into a process of mediation and reconciliation? This is more effective when the parish leaders take the initiative.

Once the conflict cycle is underway there are **five broad options**:

Termination of the Relationship – A member quits the parish or leaves the group. The parish leaders try to pressure a person to leave through shunning, threats, or the involvement of other authorities. A rector or staff member resigns or is fired.

Withdrawal -- Those involved reduce their participation, cut their financial contribution, increase their passive behavior.

"Go Back" -- The case may be made that "if only we could return to the earlier agreement, all would be well again." This may be expressed in legalistic terms or as a form of sentimentality. In any case there is never a way to really "go back"; people have changed. The "Blow Out" has taken place.

Continue the fight – This can include any actions taken by any of the parties that escalate rather than deescalate the situation. In this case continued passivity and avoidance are an escalating action.

Acceptance of New Realities -- The key that allows people to return to the process of creating and negotiating their relationships in the organization is that the new realities must be accepted. Accepted, not necessarily liked or approved of. The work that follows such acceptance will mean using many of the same processes and methods that fit Stage Five (green line behavior and methods).

Bonding and Sanctification

From the very beginning, all the relationships we have in a parish are ways in which God draws us to share in the Divine Life, work out our own identity in Christ, and develop bonds of love and unity with others. In John Macqurrie's language it is all of us, individually and in community, experiencing something of the "commonwealth of free, responsible beings united in love." In the terms of the "Relationship Cycle" we move toward that by going through the hard work of the "green lines" and/or conflict cycle several times. In that work we face into the holy work of reconciliation and forgiveness, mutual accommodation, and a letting go of illusions through solitude and prayer.

A related model, with ascetical and group development expressions that the reader may want to look into is "Bonding: Priest and Community." A priest and the parish community may arrive at a place of "realistic expectations and relationship", mature acceptance", "mutual respect and mature stability" by having engaged the earlier experiences of inflated hopes and disappointment and disillusionment.

How to use the model

Be clear about what the issue, dynamic, problem is that you are trying to understand. It may be broad or narrow, clearly defined or ambiguous.

Leaders can us the cycle to develop an effective approach to managing a conflict or progressing a needed improvement in the parish.

If you are using it with a group (the vestry, an open meeting of the parish, etc.) the model is a method to get people into a structured, safe conversation. The questions isn't who's right and who's wrong? Or, are we in stage 3, 4 or 5? People will disagree. The model gives them a way to enter into a needed discussion.

One useful process is like this:

1. Walk through the cycle. Draw it on newsprint in front of the group. It's usually best to unfold the stages bit-by-bit. Use an example other than the one the group will be discussing. That can help people stay focused on understanding the cycle.

2. Define the issue we'll be discussing.

3. Then have people come forward and place a mark on the newsprint. Where does each person believe the parish (group) is now in that cycle? If you are concerned that people will be overly influenced by the marks of others you can offset that by provided a copy of the Cycle diagram to each person and after completing the presentation asking everyone to place a mark on the handout sheet. Then they come forward to place a mark on the newsprint diagram.

4. You might then move in a number of different directions based on factors such as your sense of the group's ability to have this discussion, the amount of time you have available, etc.

   You may want to break into small groups for an initial 15 minutes to get people talking. Small groups are easier for some people to begin to express their feelings and thoughts. Or, you might want to "go around the circle"—have people speak one-by-one, making only one point at a time.

   You might ask a question such as: why did you place the mark as you did?

Remember, you aren't trying to just have people talk in a way that enables loud voices and little listening. So, often it's important to slow things down.

5. If you did break into small groups, bring people back to the whole group and take it a next step, e.g., What was said in your groups? Or, do you see a way forward that has will help the parish address the issue? Or,

6.   Consider bring the discussion to a close by have the three people "fishbowl"—sit in the center of the whole group. It might be the rector and wardens. Or, people who are highly trusted in the parish community. Or, people with a reputation and competence for careful listening and the ability to synthesize issues.

    Ask that group to share—what have you heard this group say today? What do you make of that? What do you see as the next steps after today?

Background of the model

This model is a variation on "Planned Renegotiation: A Norm-Setting OD Intervention", John J. Sherwood and John C. Glidewell, 1973. at another point it was called "Planned Renegotiation: The Pinch Model." It became popular as a tool in assessing and strategizing around organizational conflict. It was also used in marriage counseling (Sherwood and Scherer, 1975). Robert Gallagher's model understands the process as a cycle that highlights several critical phases in any relationship. The focus here is on the relationship and the parish system's need to work out a way of both maintaining stability and integrity while also adapting in the service of survival and purpose. This expression of the model is about the dynamics as seen in a parish church.