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From: Mike  
To: Nancy

Subj: RESEARCH ON CONFLICT IN CONGREGATIONS

Ref: (a) [www.beyondintractability.org/essay/polarization/](http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/polarization/)

(b) Law, Eric H.W. *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993.

(c) Law, Eric H.W. *The Bush Was Blazing But Not Consumed*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1996.

(d) Law, Eric H.W. *Inclusion - Making Room for Grace*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000.

Encl: (1) Herman, Nancy J. Conflict in the Church: A Social Network Analysis of an Anglican Congregation. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1984, 23 (1), pp. 60 - 74.

(2) Starke, Frederick A., and Bruno Dyke. Upheavals in Congregations: The Causes and Outcomes of Splits. *Review of Religious Research*, Vol 38, No. 2 (December, 1996), pp. 159 - 174.

(3) New-Edson, Rebecca F. Healthy Conflict in Congregations. *The Clergy Journal*, January 2005, pp. 33 - 35.

(4) Roemischer, Jessica. The Never-Ending Upward Quest - An interview with Dr. Don Beck. *What Is Enlightenment?* (undated)

**1. Summary.** I gathered the information included here through conversations with two Catholic theologians (GU Professors Frs. Steve Kuder and Jim Dallen) and an author who has written extensively on Catholicism (Mary Frances Coady) and internet searches. All three experts said both that they thought there is little literature on the subject; Fr. Dallen and Ms. Coady added that they are aware of few success stories in area of conflict in religious communities; they spoke in almost identical terms of the 'I'm right, you're evil' dynamic that seems to typify conflicts in religious communities, just as it does the state of contemporary American politics. That said, there is *some* literature, including three books by Eric Law that I think may be very valuable to you and the members of the congregation in question, as well as a couple of articles that may be of interest to you as a sociologist. Of the literature I read, only the Law books offer solutions; everything else is causality/consequence focused. That, however, may be helpful in light of Rebecca New-Edson's belief that the presenting issue in congregational conflicts is rarely the actual causal issue. Assuming that, a thorough understanding of the identified nominal causes of congregational conflict may be valuable. I think there may be an important opportunity beyond the immediate for COR in this subject area.

## **2. Literature/resources.**

(a) Background. As the experts I interviewed indicated, there doesn't seem to be a large body of scholarship on the subject of conflict in religious communities/congregations. However, what literature there is (or was as of 1996) seems to be listed in Starke and Dyke. Another interesting-sounding piece is mentioned in New-Edson (viz., Steinke, Peter. *Healthy Congregations: A Systems*

*Approach*. The Alban Institute, 1996.).

(b) I reviewed the following; my summaries of same are provided. I think that all of these will be interesting to you as a sociologist, but only the Law books provide the sort of 'how to' guidance probably most needed by the congregation in question. Those listed as 'enclosures' above are provided with the e-mail to which this report was attached.

(1) [www.beyondintractability.org/essay/polarization/](http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/polarization/) At this link can be found a good basic sociological/psychological outline of the dynamics of polarization. It provides references and recommended reading.

(2) Law, Eric H.W. *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb*. Per Law, the first two of his three books lay out "the foundational skills, theories, and theologies from a leadership perspective for creating inclusive community." The third book provides specific techniques, etc., to help a community "prepare to respond better to its boundary challenges" (i.e., its inclusion challenges). Strength of these books is that they provide a body of scholarship where none exists. Further, they centralize a critical aspect of the situation at hand: a Christian community must address its problems using the teachings of the faith themselves as their guides. In other words, the faith that unites this community can - and should - be considered the central opportunity as well as an unavoidable obligation. Also, these books are not Catholic, so they may offer invitation that might be missing from a product of the Catholic scholarly community. NB: Law's books build on each other and consideration might be given to reading them in order.

The first few chapters of *The Wolf* comprise a sociological study of power dynamics; they could have been written by you. Law mainly focuses on differences between ethnicities, so the information is not necessarily directly applicable in its specifics to COR's client's situation. He also addresses leadership styles and group dynamics. Things that might be helpful:

- To the extent there is an imbalance of power in the community, the book in whole may be a resource;
- The guidance offered for leaders in the community;
- Encouragement to view building community and resolving difference as a Gospel mandate.
- Appendices B and C offer good specific models for dialogue.

(3) Law, Eric H.W. *The Bush Was Blazing But Not Consumed*. In this work, Law treats notion of dialogue as a form of liturgy. He presents multi-cultural communities not as "melting pots" in which minorities are sublimated to the dominant culture, but as dynamic synergies in which differences are to be welcomed as strengths.

(4) Law, Eric H.W. *Inclusion - Making Room for Grace*. Law's stated purpose of this book is to fill the gap between good intentions and actual, successful inclusion "by providing practical and theologically sound theories, models, and skills that are necessary for moving a faith community toward greater inclusion" (p. xi).

Chapters 5 - 10 "further explore and and describe the inclusion process in Christian theological terms and (provide) practical facilitation skills and processes."

The book's excellent and potentially very helpful appendices are:

- A: Checklist for Activating the Inclusion Process
- B: Rights, Respect, and Responsibilities
- C: Exploring the History of a Congregation
- D: *Is Your Church Ministry Balanced?*

(5) Herman, Nancy J. Conflict in the Church: A Social Network Analysis of an Anglican Congregation. This study is primarily methodology-focused, addressing the potential benefit of social network analysis in identifying the nature and alignment of cliques involved in religious community conflict. While the description of social network analysis process is likely of interest primarily to sociologists, the conclusions re: the test community (see 'Interpretations,' pp. 68ff) may be pertinent to the issue at hand and are worth reading.

(6) Starke, Frederick A., and Bruno Dyke. Upheavals in Congregations: The Causes and Outcomes of Splits. This is an examination of the causes and outcomes of conflict in 11 religious congregations that eventually split up. Unfortunately, it doesn't offer guidance for/insight to preventing community breakdown. The first page offers a good summary. The study's key finding: those who remained in original community blamed disagreement over authority, whereas those who left to form a new community laid the blame at the feet of doctrine/dogma. Authors report it is difficult to generalize re: antecedents of congregational conflict. It provides an extensive bibliography covering over 30 studies and articles; apparently comprehensive of major literature on subject to date (1996), it may be helpful in identifying additional useful resources.

(7) New-Edson, Rebecca F. Healthy Conflict in Congregations. This is an excellent article. It is simple and direct, but full of practical insight and wisdom. Well worth read. The author points out that a conflict's presenting issue is rarely the actual. She lists potential actual conflicts and stresses importance of identifying *them* and not falling for the presenting symptom as causal. She thinks that the higher the level of anxiety involved in conflict, the more quickly resolution will be sought, usually to detriment. She offers good insights on management of conflict.

(8) Roemischer, Jessica. The Never-Ending Upward Quest. I include this here as it is highly recommended by Fr. Kuder. It is an interesting bit of psychology though I think it is of minimal value for the matter at hand.

### 3. Conclusions/recommendations.

- Based on my limited research and personal experience, I share Law's opinion that most conflicts in religious communities need to be addressed in the light of faith, i.e., that the members of these communities need to consider Christ's teachings regarding harmony and community and seek to live them out. Perhaps study of the church's early conflicts in Acts would be helpful.

- If further research is indicated, I would suggest looking at *Commonweal*, and *America*.

- I think there is a significant opportunity for COR to develop an important area of expertise here. The research and practical work COR has already done would, it seems to me, already put it in a position of national - if not international - leadership in the area.