

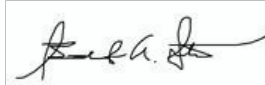
Before the Next Storm:
A Pastoral Approach to Conflict Transformation
in the Local Church by Reviving the Old Testament's Theological Language

by

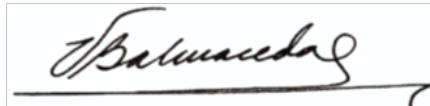
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Date: April 11, 2024

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William Willimon, D.Min. Director

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University

2024

ABSTRACT

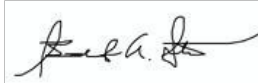
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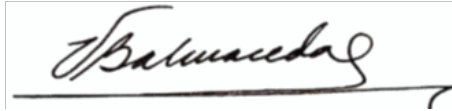
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Abstract

Local churches suffer from insufficient preparedness for intragroup conflict. This problem may be addressed fruitfully by pastors and their local church leaders when they encounter Old Testament narratives of intragroup conflict with their theological imaginations. With the working metaphor of storm preparation, the author examines how imaginative theological speech gives a constructive shape to the local church's conflict cycles. Drawing from John Paul Lederach's work on the role of the imagination in conflict transformation and the work of Brent Strawn on the Old Testament's theological language, the author developed a Bible study that trains participating local church leaders in four elements of conflict preparedness: imaginative theological fluency, Lederach's conflict transformation skillset, empathic practical wisdom, and the capacity to rehumanize an enemy. The Old Testament is an essential theological resource for the local church cultivating intragroup conflict preparedness, because the Old Testament itself contains many narratives of intragroup conflict as well as rich intertextual theological conversations that illustrate the productive intragroup tensions abiding within God's people. A pastor may tap into these narratives and conversations creatively in this Bible study to develop participating leaders' imaginative theological speech about conflict in their own lives. The quantitative and qualitative outcomes of this Bible study's first iteration in the local church are analyzed and interpreted theologically in order to reimagine the storm metaphor itself. By intervening with the Old Testament's theological speech during low-intensity phases of a conflict cycle, the pastor weatherproofs their local church leaders before the next storm.

For my family, who first taught me to speak the language...

אלהים מושיב יחידים ביתה

—Ps 68:7 [HB]

my father,

טעמו וראו כי־טוב יהוה

—Ps 34:9 [HB]

my mother,

אמו תנחמנו

—Isa 66:13

my brother,

אח לצרה יולד

—Prov 17:17

Myles,

איש אשר על־בית

—Gen 43:19

Parker,

איש שדה

—Gen 25:27

and especially for Meghan,

שימני כחותם על־לבך

—Song 8:6

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The staff of First Methodist Clanton kindly suffered my obsession with the topic of local church conflict, encouraged me during self-imposed writing retreats, and comforted me with theological language in the shape of prayer. Thank you for incarnating what I hope my words convey.

The volunteer leaders of my church encouraged me, prayed for me, and joyfully practiced conflict transformation with me in a living laboratory, so that I could test the merits of the Bible study I developed for this thesis. Thank you for imagining with me.

My family provided countless measures of support and encouragement. My grandfather provided a quiet place both conducive to writing and filled with good memories. My mother and father provided encouragement and childcare. My children gave me the gift of their patience, reminding me of all the fun things we will do now that the work is done. My wife Meghan not only offered all the measures of support named above, she understood and believed in this root work for the church. She also lives its import every day.

Thank you all for laboring in the garden with me.

1. Introduction: Transforming the Approach to Local Church Conflict Cycles from Storm Cleanup to Storm Preparedness

1.1 Preparing for Cycles of Stormy Weather in the Local Church

Conflict in the local church is a storm of language and emotion. When the forecast looks stormy, who prepares to mitigate the damage? Severe conflict has a profound effect on a church's leadership culture.¹ The church accumulates damage from the storm cycles, like a town in tornado alley repeatedly battered by severe weather. The pastor is expected to do disaster cleanup, often alone. While leaving conflict aftermath to the pastor relieves pressure from church leadership, this responsibility frustrates the pastor and rarely produces a healthy church. The pastor cleaning up destructive conflict cycles inadvertently becomes a human lightning rod. This is not conflict preparation but conflict reaction. The local church needs better preparation for conflict before the next storm hits.

A pastor's tenure depends on how well the harm from cyclical conflict is mitigated in the church.² A temporary relief worker travels to do clean up in a disaster area for a week and then leaves, but a pastor is enmeshed within the church's life long-term. Conflicts both petty and massive are etched into pastoral memories. If local church conflict is a storm that the pastor alone must weather, no wonder the literature continues to report that pastors are weather-beaten.³ Ken

¹ Susan K. Henderson, "When Conflict Erupts in Your Church: An Interview with Speed Leas," in *Conflict Management in Congregations*, ed. David B. Lott (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield / Alban Institute, 2001), 15–17.

² David R. Sawyer, *Hope in Conflict: Discovering Wisdom in Congregational Turmoil* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2007), 68–83.

³ Christopher J. Adams et al., "Clergy Burnout: A Comparison Study with Other Helping Professions," *Pastoral Psychology* 66, no. 2 (2017): 147–75.

Sande compiles statistics from several data-driven studies as evidence of decline, burnout, and attrition among pastors in the United States. There is also mounting evidence that the harm done to pastors and local churches in their intragroup conflicts outweighs spiritual fruit.⁴ An alternative method of storm response is needed to offer pastors relief from the solitary burden of relentless intragroup conflict. How can local church leaders be transformed such that they are prepared to help the pastor navigate local church conflict? This strategic shift of local church leaders from a passive, reactionary posture to a proactive, prepared posture is what I explore in my thesis.

Pastors need to train their local church leaders to share the weight of the intragroup conflicts that arise repeatedly in congregations. In John Paul Lederach's approach to conflict, he creates training courses focused on the relational well-being of those involved in conflict. He trains groups of leaders with this relational focus in order to awaken the group's latent cultural assets, with which the leaders creatively transform their cycles of conflict. This process is the creation of constructive cycles.⁵

In the local church a constructive cycle might be a liturgical practice such as corporate prayer or the eucharist. A cycle can be programmatic, such as a tight-knit Sunday School class or a twelve-step program. A cycle can also be less formal but still just as constructive. An informal constructive cycle would involve the habits of people talking in the parking lot after worship—including new guests in those conversations instead of ignoring them. It is also helpful when a constructive cycle includes a creative dimension, as in a choir, sewing circle, or drama team. A

⁴ Ken Sande, "Strike the Shepherd," *RW360: Going Beyond Emotional Intelligence* (blog), March 28, 2022, <https://rw360.org/2022/03/28/strike-the-shepherd/>.

⁵ John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 1997), 138; John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (New York: Good Books, 2003), 42.

constructive cycle can be almost any repeated pattern of relational human behavior as long as it contributes to the cohesion of the group and supports the healthy resolution of the group's conflicts.⁶ By contrast, a destructive cycle also looks superficially like any of the cycles above, except that the patterns in the cycle deteriorate the church's cohesion and increase the storm's intensity to a harmful level.⁷ The parking lot becomes the scene for gossip. The Sunday School class turns exclusive. The drama team creates...drama. Regardless of the particulars, Lederach recommends that a constructive cycle be context-specific enough to draw on that community's distinctive cultural assets in order for the cycle to become generative. Constructive cycles beget more constructive cycles. A sufficient saturation of constructive cycles can squeeze destructive cycles out of the church's "relational space."⁸ Transformation takes on a life of its own.

When local church leaders are prepared for intragroup conflict and cooperate well during the storm, the outcomes for everyone are more fruitful. Constructive cycles are necessary because once an intense storm of conflict breaks loose, no pastor can conduct conflict transformation on their own, no matter how competent the pastor is.⁹ The pastor is enmeshed in the dysfunction of the local church deeply. So when a pastor intervenes unilaterally while a conflict is at a highly

⁶ Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 17–22.

⁷ George W. Bullard, Jr., *Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2008), 8–17. Bullard coins the term "conflict literate" to describe local church leaders' capacity for handling their community's conflicts (11). He uses his term similarly to my term "conflict preparedness." I am indebted to Bullard for his thorough discussion of the seven levels of conflict intensity, which have informed my thinking about the periods of calm between intense phases of conflict in the church.

⁸ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 75.

⁹ Marlin Thomas, *Transforming Conflict in Your Church: A Practical Guide* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2002), 31.

intense level, the pastor only feeds destructive cycles further.¹⁰ Since not only the pastor but also volunteer leaders are enmeshed in the relationship system of the local church, it is important to train volunteer leaders to contribute constructively before the next storm.¹¹ Conflict preparation is a constructive, cyclical process that leaders must engage together.

1.2 Insufficient Storm Prep: Limitations in Current Approaches to Conflict

Many popular resources offer linear templates for resolving conflict step-by-step, with a scriptural text presented as the key to each step. Other resources about church conflict will offer proof texts as rules for church discipline extrapolated from a few verses in the Gospels or from Pauline Epistles.¹² However, the reason that these approaches to conflict are insufficient is that Scripture itself often becomes triangled into the conflict.¹³ An immature leader may weaponize Scripture and increase the storm damage in a church conflict.

Other Christian resources on conflict draw from insights in the practical disciplines of counseling, leadership, and organizational theory while also giving nuanced attention to Scripture.¹⁴ These authors interact mostly with New Testament texts, using Old Testament texts

¹⁰ Speed B. Leas, “Harvesting the Learnings of Conflict Management,” in *Conflict Management in Congregations*, ed. David B. Lott (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001), 11–12.

¹¹ Deborah Van Heusen Hunsinger and Theresa F. Latini, *Transforming Church Conflict: Compassionate Leadership in Action* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 2.

¹² Robert D. Jones, *Pursuing Peace: A Christian Guide to Handling Our Conflicts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 17–27, Kindle. Jones recognizes this problematic emphasis on rules from the New Testament taken out of their narrative context. As a corrective, he traces the narrative of God’s peacemaking activity through the Old and New Testaments.

¹³ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship: Moving from Shallow Christianity to Deep Transformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021), 6. As Scazzero points out, a Christian leader may muster Scripture to their aid in a conflict, while remaining ironically “unaware of [their own] reactivity.”

¹⁴ Charles H. Cosgrove and Dennis D. Hatfield, *Church Conflict: The Hidden Systems Behind the Fights* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994); K. Brynolf Lyon and Dan P. Moseley, *How to Lead in Church Conflict: Healing*

as a springboard for the topic of local church conflict. It is unfortunate that the Old Testament has served only as a secondary resource in conflict literature, since the Old Testament contains many intragroup conflicts that are instructive lenses through which local church leaders can gain perspective on their own conflicts.

Just as there is no shortage of book-length resources on local church conflict, there are also a variety of experiential models available to the local church for dealing with conflict. Experiential models such as Appreciative Inquiry depend on a patterned, facilitated team experience of verbalization and reflection resulting in cooperative action. However, Stephen Abbott and Kip Holley note that Appreciative Inquiry's principle of positivity tends to make facilitators dismissive of long-term cyclical conflicts in the community, with the result that conflicts tend not to be processed but deferred.¹⁵ For a group with an ultra-long-term organizational lifespan, such as a church, this approach does not address the cyclical nature of the church's conflict.

Furthermore, informed by my experience with conflict processes in evangelical local churches, I have noticed that Christians, especially in the evangelical tradition, tend to resist experiential models that use language and concepts that have no scriptural or theological foundation. Conflicts in the local church are storms made of the language, emotions, and relational dynamics of the church as a group. A church has a local theological culture that gives its storms a theological quality, making a church storm very different from the conflict in secular

Ungrieved Loss (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012); Paul A. Mickey and Robert L. Wilson, *Conflict and Resolution* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973); and Sawyer, *Hope in Conflict*.

¹⁵ Stephen Abbott and Kip Holley, "Models: Appreciative Inquiry," *Organizing Engagement*, November 1, 2019, <https://organizingengagement.org/models/appreciative-inquiry/>.

organizations that experiential models are designed for. Local churches require conflict preparedness that is theological.

Models such as Appreciative Inquiry have their place in the local church. At times I still employ the principles of Appreciative Inquiry myself. However, I lift up the limitations of secular experiential models to suggest that pastors return to Scripture to train their local leaders in conflict transformation. My thesis draws on the existing scriptural resources of the local church by using Lederach's creative approach to training design.

Though the ministry context in which I built my approach is an evangelical local church, my research's implications are not limited to evangelical Christians. My research may be helpful to any Christian leader studying intragroup conflict in the local church. It is important in Lederach's approach to be clear what cultural markers and assets one is using, because his approach requires context-specific tailoring to fit the community's setting. My evangelical context has framed my application of Lederach. I hope by making clear the ministry context of my training design that leaders from any Christian tradition can imagine what features of Lederach's approach they may adapt to address intragroup conflict in their own churches.

To summarize, there are three major conditions in local church ministry contributing to my research problem:

1. There is a need for an experiential training that prepares pastors and local church leaders for future conflict.
2. Existing Christian publications on conflict omit intragroup conflict found in the Old Testament that is relevant to the theological quality of conflict in the church.
3. Current experiential models have mixed results in local churches because these models are too secular to address the theological factors contributing to destructive local church conflict.

Pastors need a training designed so that both pastor and leaders can encounter the theological resources of the Old Testament in order to grow more prepared together for intragroup conflict. Rather than weaponizing Scripture to clinch an argument during hot conflict, we can engage Scripture as our language tutor during our conflicts' cooler interludes in order to practice wise speech that deescalates conflict. Local church leaders may be unfamiliar with many Old Testament narratives, but that is not a disadvantage. This unfamiliarity provides a fresh and imaginative starting point. From that point we can develop a new theological imagination for conflict.

In the process of fostering that new theological imagination, leaders prepare together for future conflict storms, instead of hoping the pastor will sort things out afterward. Based on Lederach's work as a scholar and trainer, I define this form of conflict preparedness as the continuously growing capacity of leaders to cope with and constructively respond to conflict within their community by drawing on cultural resources already existing within the community.¹⁶ The Old Testament is one of those essential but underutilized cultural resources in the local church. But to utilize the Old Testament again, we have to learn to speak its theological language.

1.3 Storm-Talk: The Old Testament as Weather Patterns to Inform Local Church Leaders' Conflict Preparedness

Language itself is metaphorically described as stormy weather in the Old Testament (Deut 32:2; Ps 29:3; 148:8). Because the storms of local church conflict are storms of language

¹⁶ John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 5–7.

and emotion with a theological character, this training is designed to draw participants into the Old Testament's theological language as a means toward conflict preparedness. If the rain that comes from storm cycles in the local church is transformed toward a beneficial purpose, the spoken theological language of the Old Testament may thrive once again. For this metaphor of the Old Testament as a theological language, I rely heavily on the work of Brent Strawn.¹⁷

Though participants in my training may be unfamiliar with Old Testament texts, in designing a Bible study for conflict preparedness I anticipated that participants would respond to Scripture with deeper engagement than to other secular approaches to conflict. As participants gain facility with the Old Testament's theological language, they can reimagine their own role in conflict theologically. This reimagining is critical for the kind of preparedness I want to develop in my participants. We engage the weather patterns of intragroup conflict that we find in the Old Testament in order to develop our storm-talk—our capacity to articulate what God may be doing through conflict in our local church.

In my thesis I argue that a pastor can train their local church leaders in four elements of intragroup conflict preparedness by drawing imaginatively from the Old Testament's theological language. Those four elements are:

1. imaginative theological fluency
2. Lederach's conflict transformation skillset
3. empathic practical wisdom
4. the capacity to rehumanize an enemy.

¹⁷ Brent A. Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 6–13.

Informed by Lederach's non-linear approach to conflict transformation, I suggest that these four elements of conflict preparedness develop in a cyclical, non-linear manner. As participants prepare for future storm cycles with theological language, those cycles of conflict are transformed.

Participants in a creative group training with their pastor can develop these four elements in a Bible study because the Old Testament provides an imaginative range of texts featuring intragroup conflict. These texts comprise many genres of both narrative prose and poetry within which local church leaders can imaginatively reflect on conflict—how to survive it and even grow resilient from it. Resilient leaders are prepared leaders, weather-proofing their church in advance to withstand conflict storms. Like the ancient communities that produced inspired Old Testament narratives drawn from their experience of conflict, resilient churches have leaders who are prepared to articulate theological meaning in their experiences of church conflict. Good preparations for conflict increase local church leaders' imaginative capacity to discern what God is up to when the storm rages all around.

1.4 Outline of the Argument

In this chapter I have introduced the problem of the local church's theological deficit in its conflict preparedness, which my Bible study is designed to address. In chapter 2, I explain Lederach's imaginative, non-linear approach to conflict transformation and make the case for why his work is suitable for the local church.¹⁸ Chapter 3 provides the connection between my

¹⁸ Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 55–118.

exegesis of Old Testament texts and my design of the imaginative role-play exercises featured in the Bible study.¹⁹

In chapters 4–7, I analyze written responses from the participants who trained with me to see how the four elements of intragroup conflict preparedness developed over the course of the study. I conclude in chapter 8 with my theological interpretation of the transformative process that we underwent as a group.

Since this thesis is an interdisciplinary project joining together biblical studies with human research in a focus group, I include three appendices related to the human research components of my thesis. Appendix A presents the trainer outlines from each session of the Bible study, “Forgotten Fighting Words,” which pulled triple-duty not only as a Bible study but as conflict training and as a focus group. In Appendix B on methodology, I share how I integrated Mark Allan Powell’s focus group Bible study with the work of Lederach and Strawn to design this Bible study to serve these three functions.²⁰ Appendix C analyzes the before-and-after data of the introductory and closing responses collected from the participants in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the Bible study as a training course.

1.5 Definitions and Scope of Research

As a working definition for conflict, I adopt the following by Joyce Hocker, Keith Berry, and William Wilmot: “conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent

¹⁹ I refer to this experimental study component of my thesis as a Bible study, leader training course, or focus group, depending on which aspect I am attending to. The experience was a composite of all three. For further discussion of my methodology, see Appendix B.

²⁰ Mark A. Powell, *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 29–107.

parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals.”²¹ I favor this definition because it names several dynamics that are constitutive of conflict in local churches: the competition over goals and resources, but especially the conflicted relationships of people in the local church who paradoxically both interfere with one another and depend on one another for their group identity. The definition also avoids assigning a positive or negative value to conflict.

Another important implication of this working definition is that church conflict is not inherently sinful or damaging to the local church. Conflict is inevitable in the life of the local church, and certain forms of conflict are even necessary for the sake of the church’s organizational health and pursuit of its mission.²² As such, the Bible study I designed does not eliminate conflict from the local church. Rather my Bible study is what Lederach calls a “container”—a nurturing, creative “relational space” within which a group may reshape the quality of its conflict cycles. Constructive conflict cycles are the desired outcomes, in place of destructive cycles, with the hope that unnecessary relational damage is prevented in conflicts to come.²³ In these constructive conflict cycles in the local church, people settle their differences without resorting to the kinds of behaviors that damage relationships: coercion, unjust treatment, abuse, or prejudice.²⁴ In place of such destructive, relationship-breaking behaviors, a group

²¹ Joyce L. Hocker, Keith Berry, and William W. Wilmot, *Interpersonal Conflict*, 11th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2022), 37, Kindle.

²² Bullard, Jr., *Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict*, 8.

²³ John Paul Lederach and Angela Jill Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out: Journeys Through the Soundscape of Reconciliation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 10, 64, 71–72, 89–90, 94, 97, 100–102, 105–10, 142, 190–91, 198–200, 205–7, 210, 223, 227–29, 233, Kindle.

²⁴ Thomas Porter, *The Spirit and Art of Conflict Transformation: Creating a Culture of JustPeace* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), 11–15.

nurtures the four constitutive elements of conflict preparedness named above. By doing so, the “container” of the Bible study develops the positive potential that conflict holds for the local church.

The scope of my thesis is limited to intragroup conflict, which has been identified as one of four major categories of conflict in faith communities, each defined briefly as follows:²⁵

1. interpersonal conflict: conflict between persons
2. intrapersonal conflict: conflict within the self
3. intragroup conflict: conflict between persons within the same group
4. intergroup conflict: conflict between groups of people.

Situated within these four categories, intragroup conflict means conflict between one or more persons within the context of their shared group—the local church. I focus on intragroup conflict so that pastors and local church leaders may gain fruitful insight about their church and its conflicts by conceiving of their local church as a discreet group in its own right, a group with a life of its own that is more than the sum of its parts.

I use the term conflict transformation compatibly with Lederach’s usage of the term,²⁶ preferable over terms like conflict resolution or conflict management. Implied in conflict transformation is an understanding that the absence of all conflict is impossible. Conflict transformation in the local church involves the creation of new processes by which parties in conflict reduce harm to one another, treat one another with dignity, and protect the well-being of

²⁵ Lyon and Moseley, *How to Lead in Church Conflict*, 9; Mickey and Wilson, *Conflict and Resolution*, 35–38; Thomas, *Transforming Conflict in Your Church*, 24. I adapted my list of the four categories from these authors, though versions of this taxonomy are common in the field and predate their work as well.

²⁶ Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 22–23.

other stakeholders affected by the conflict. To transform future storm cycles of conflict in the local church, pastors and their leaders need to get out ahead of those storms theologically. In Lederach's approach to conflict transformation, training prepares people for the peaceful handling of conflict. The Old Testament Bible study I designed is an expression of Lederach's approach to conflict transformation as good conflict preparation, so that pastors and leaders are not caught helpless again in cycles of bad weather.

Lederach deploys his approach primarily in situations of violent conflict. What is the connection between Lederach's site-work in places of catastrophic violence and the storms that a pastor must weather in the local church? In the following chapter, I explore the advantages that Lederach's approach brings to the development of leaders' conflict preparedness through his distinctly imaginative forms of conflict training.

2. Imagining Better Storms: Intragroup Conflict Preparedness for Pastors and Their Leaders

2.1 Training Local Church Leaders as a Pastoral Approach to Conflict

A pastor readily sees the need for storm preparedness, but how does a pastor intervene in storm cycles to change the behavior of church leaders in conflict? Training exercises are an effective way to prepare local church leaders to transform intragroup conflict. Preparatory training is also a hallmark of Lederach's approach to conflict transformation.¹ Participants in Lederach's trainings utilize values and knowledge from within their own culture and community in order to reinterpret their conflicts imaginatively, in the hope that the community may transform future cycles of conflict to reduce harm and produce benefits. His exercises elicit latent assets that were preexistent in the community before the training began. Lederach has argued for his approach's advantages in cross-cultural situations, in which conventional prescriptive models have not been successful.² His approach involves creative exercises such as role-play, so that participants can create new pathways toward reconciliation. I designed my Bible study as a training for a pastor and their leaders by drawing from Lederach's imaginative approach.

In this chapter I first explain how Lederach's non-linear, imaginative approach to conflict transformation facilitated the creation of my Old Testament Bible study to serve as a conflict training course. I then introduce and define the four elements of conflict preparedness that my Bible study cultivates.

¹ Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 55–62.

² Lederach, 7, 57–58.

2.2 Lederach's Non-Linear Imagination for Cross-Cultural Conflict Training

Lederach's approach to conflict transformation is distinct for the way his faith informs his imaginative and non-linear practices in order to foster relationships among people in conflict. Narratives and non-linear metaphors have a strong theological influence on his work.³ The theological value he places on narrative makes his work highly translatable for training leaders with Old Testament narratives. He uses non-linear metaphors that are cyclical, such as the resonant sound of a singing bowl, or enmeshed, like a tangled net or a spider's web.⁴ Metaphors of cyclicity and enmeshment help a pastor articulate the long-term relational patterns comprising a local church's conflict.

By contrast, many sources in the secular field of conflict and peace studies deal with conflict in ways that do not easily translate into the local church. Secular scholarship in the field of conflict and peace studies focuses on intractable violent conflicts, conflicts between nation-states, or negotiation science within a North American legal or economic context. However, trainers who practice conflict transformation in the style of Lederach are noteworthy for their humility and imaginative curiosity about the assets of the local community.⁵ The trainer does not force change or impose alien values. The trainer instead utilizes creative exercises that elicit preexisting practices and values that have potential to transform the conflict.⁶ This humility and

³ John Paul Lederach, *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2014), 14–16.

⁴ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 76–77, 101–111; Lederach and Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*, 88–99.

⁵ Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 19–30.

⁶ Lederach, *Building Peace*, 26.

respect for the cultural assets of the community allow Lederach's approach to port well into cross-cultural situations. This portability also makes his approach available to pastors who want to bridge the cultural "gap" Powell identifies between pastors and their laity.⁷

While Lederach's work has a theological frame, even if one were to set that theology aside, Lederach has added much to the scholarly conversation on cross-cultural conflict transformation. In his on-site trainings, he departs from conventional wisdom by deploying exercises that invite participants to move creatively toward reconciliation in ways inconceivable within a prescriptive model. Training sessions involve poetry writing, drama, and music.⁸ Despite his unconventional approach, Lederach's approach has a record of fruitful applications among trainers working on-site cross-culturally on deep conflicts.⁹

Note that while my Bible study features a skillset that Lederach himself teaches, my training is not a skills-first prescription. The relational focus of the pastor as trainer and co-learner with the participants takes priority over skill acquisition. It is through the relationships with participants that the trainer awakens the participants' own capacities to transform conflict. In conventional conflict management models, if the prescribed rules of engagement are not agreed upon by the facilitator and participants, the negotiation quickly breaks down. But in Lederach's approach, as long as a relationship remains, there is hope that the people involved may engage their imagination to transform the conflict.¹⁰

⁷ Powell, *What Do They Hear?*, 25–26.

⁸ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 65–73.

⁹ Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 88–122.

¹⁰ Lederach, *Reconcile*, 84; Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 88. Lederach observes that in cross-cultural situations a trainer is even more prone to underestimate how important relationships are for healing.

2.3 The Local Church and Pastors in Cross-Cultural Conflict

When a pastor first steps into leadership at a church, it is common advice that the pastor should prioritize relationship-building over proving skill.¹¹ One reason this trade wisdom rings true is that in moving to a new church a pastor experiences something like a cross-cultural exchange. Many seminary-trained pastors experience significant cultural dissonance with their congregations, because a seminary has a local culture all its own.¹² Ironically, pastors end up feeling that they have to unlearn much of what they have learned in their training in order to lead their own church.¹³ Lederach writes about a similar experience when conflict mediators try to apply conventional conflict resolution techniques in cultures not their own.¹⁴ They too have to unlearn old habits that do not produce the same outcomes in a different culture. However, pastors can draw from Scripture, their resource held in common with the local church, to awaken a language that has lain dormant. The need to access that lost common language is why I turn to Strawn's work. The roots of that lost theological language are buried in the Old Testament.¹⁵ So the Old Testament must be revived.

¹¹ Kennon L. Callahan, *A New Beginning for Pastors and Congregations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 6–11, 78–80.

¹² H. Dana Fearon and Gordon S. Mikoski, *Straining at the Oars: Case Studies in Pastoral Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 16–17, Kindle.

¹³ Noah Karger, "Pastors Still Need Seminary Degrees," *Christianity Today*, July 20, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/july-web-only/gordon-conwell-evangelical-seminary-pastoral-ministry.html>.

¹⁴ Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 6; Lederach, *Building Peace*, 23.

¹⁵ Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying*, 213–22.

2.4 The Old Testament as a Stormy Training Field for Imagination

Chapter 1 made the case for intragroup conflict preparedness as essential for conflict transformation in the local church. Preparedness requires training. The Old Testament provides pastors and leaders with an imaginative training field of stormy intragroup conflicts in which the leaders can re-articulate conflict with revived theological language. Lederach presents his exercises in training courses for community leaders who want to prepare better for future conflict.¹⁶ Many other experiential and prescriptive conflict resolution models, both secular and Christian, require high stakes confrontation of present issues.¹⁷ But Lederach's oblique approach uses the proximity of relevant imaginary conflicts in order to give participants relief from the pressure to confront their current conflicts head-on.

By giving imaginative space between the group and their present conflicts, Lederach prepares participants for transformation by suggesting they imagine how they would peacefully resolve hypothetical conflicts in which circumstances are otherwise. He invites participants in his trainings to create role-play scenarios that the participants act out in order to practice conflict transformation skills. Since conflict is a storm of language and emotion, this imaginative training ground gives participants space to practice that language and emotion while reimagining current conflicts tacitly in the back of their minds. Present conflicts are addressed indirectly at first and then only directly at a pace set by the leaders themselves. In this way preparedness training is not merely a hypothetical exercise but a catalyst that can transform cycles of conflict in the

¹⁶ Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 87–88. Lederach frequently refers to himself as a “trainer” and to his programs as “training.”

¹⁷ Jason W. Locke, “Using Appreciative Inquiry as a Tool for Congregational Change,” *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry* 4, no. 1 (2018): 34–35. Locke reports two incidents of congregational conflict of severe intensity resulting from a discernment model that addresses present conflict directly.

community. In the local church, the Old Testament can be that catalytic and imaginative training field for leaders to practice better storm response.

2.5 Defining Four Elements of Conflict Preparedness with the Old Testament as a Transformative Cultural Asset of the Local Church

The Old Testament itself can become a primary cultural asset for conflict transformation in the local church when a pastor and their leaders turn to its imaginative theological language to develop their conflict preparedness. With Lederach as an influence, I crafted my Old Testament Bible study not as a step-by-step recipe but as a non-linear training that cultivates four elements of preparedness through role-play and conversational exercises. These exercises, rooted in Old Testament narratives and poetry, are designed to elicit imaginative responses to the intragroup conflict in the text. The Old Testament provides the theological language by which we enact the text with role-plays and reflect in conversation on these role-plays afterward.¹⁸

In chapters 4–7, I analyze the four elements of conflict preparedness as the training outcomes that surfaced in the written responses from participants in my Bible study. I define the four elements here for further discussion in those chapters:

1. Imaginative theological fluency in the Old Testament. This element involves what is widely called “biblical literacy,” familiarity with the shape of the Old Testament canon. However, there is more involved in fluency than retention of biblical knowledge.¹⁹ As Strawn argues, fluency involves the ability to articulate theologically with the imagery and concepts of the Old Testament in one’s own context.²⁰ With Lederach’s emphasis on the imagination, I looked for signs in the

¹⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 590. Brueggemann says that the Torah is, “a rich, dense field of imagination in which Israel is free to receive its life, playfully, as the people of God.” This imaginative function of the Torah can extend to the rest of the Old Testament canon as Christians enter its imaginative world.

¹⁹ Dru Johnson and Celina Durgin, “Wasting Quiet Time,” *Christianity Today*, April 2023, 62–71.

²⁰ Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying*, 230–38.

responses that a participant used their imagination to creatively address the Old Testament text to their own experience with conflict.

2. Lederach's conflict transformation skillset. In each role-play of my five-session training, the participants enacted a conflict transformation skill from Lederach's work in order to apply his creative, non-linear approach practically. The five conflict transformation skills we practiced are:
 - 2.1. Self-awareness-in-context (conscientization). The capacity to hold awareness of one's own emotions during a conflict while also recognizing the different emotions of others involved.²¹
 - 2.2. Active listening with applied paraphrasing. The skill of listening with full attention to another without preparing a retort, but instead replying with a paraphrase of what the person has just said, in order to complete a cycle of communication.²²
 - 2.3. Problem lens and solution lens (my terms, Lederach calls these the "Episode lens and epicenter lens"). The episode lens is the view of a conflict by which we focus on the external events or symptoms of a conflict. With the epicenter lens, we focus on the long-term patterns and dynamics that make conflict destructive.²³
 - 2.4. Centered speaking. Speech during conflict that emphasizes one's own needs and feelings rather than assigning motives, accusing, or issuing imperatives. Through centered speaking, hidden offers may emerge by which the conflict may develop constructively.²⁴
 - 2.5. Encounter. The willingness to engage a conflict thoroughly with the "mystery of risk," rather than avoiding conflict or reacting with passive-aggression.²⁵
3. Empathic practical wisdom. The capacity to put oneself emotionally in the place of another in order to transform a conflict. In the case of this training, empathic choices

²¹ Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 112–13.

²² Lederach, *Reconcile*, 118–19.

²³ Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 61–67.

²⁴ Carolyn Schrock-Shenk, "Interpersonal Conflict: Centered Communication," in *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians*, by John Paul Lederach (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2014), 140–41; Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. (New York: Penguin, 2011), 187, Kindle.

²⁵ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 163–64; Lederach, *Reconcile*, 42.

may occur by putting oneself in the place of one of the biblical figures encountered in Old Testament texts.²⁶

4. The capacity to rehumanize the enemy. The process of reversing the dehumanization of an opponent in order to rediscover and appreciate the humanity one shares with the opponent.²⁷

In a constructive cycle of conflict, the four elements converge repeatedly because these elements are non-linear. Lederach calls these confluences “resonance.”²⁸ For example, practical wisdom contributes to a person rehumanizing their enemy. Likewise, one might argue that one cannot practice active listening and applied paraphrasing without having self-awareness in context. Or we might suggest that the skill of encounter cannot occur without rehumanizing the enemy. The confluences are many.

The four elements are amplified when one or more elements converge, though these confluences resist neat organization.²⁹ Lederach’s approach to conflict involves such cyclicity. He also calls this recurrence of mutually reinforcing processes “simultaneity.” Conflict processes are simultaneous in the sense that many destructive and constructive processes are ongoing at the same time. In conflict transformation, multiple constructive processes need to occur simultaneously in order to replace destructive processes.³⁰ These four elements of preparedness are mutually reinforcing constructive processes because these elements may converge simultaneously to interrupt other processes that are destructive. Prepared local church leaders put

²⁶ Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe, *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing* (New York: Riverhead, 2010), 23, Kindle.

²⁷ Lederach, *Reconcile*, 74–80.

²⁸ Lederach and Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*, 88–99.

²⁹ Lederach and Lederach, 5–6.

³⁰ Lederach, *Building Peace*, 131.

these elements into practice so that the storms of destructive conflict are transformed. I designed my Bible study as a non-linear training in the Old Testament's cyclical theological conversations in order to facilitate the confluence of elements.³¹ When these elements converge, leaders are better prepared for conflict, and conflict storm cycles can be transformed.

How do we novices understand the Old Testament's theological speech well enough to converse about the weighty subject of conflict? Lederach's creative approach can help. Next, I make clear how leaders can creatively engage Old Testament texts in order to begin this vital conversation right where we are.

³¹ Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying*, 204. Strawn's approach is friendly toward Lederach's concept of constructive cyclicity. Strawn calls the Old Testament's cyclical theological conversation "regularized repetition." He notes an example of this cyclical theology in the way that Joshua picks up the theological language of Deuteronomy. The two texts speak "dialects of the same language."

3. Exegesis for the Role-Play of Conflict Transformation Skills: Imaginatively Engaging Conflict in the Old Testament

Because church conflict is a storm of language and emotion, it is helpful for leaders to imagine the emotions and motivations of the human beings depicted in the narratives of Old Testament intragroup conflict. Old Testament narrative gives only sparing insight into the inner emotional lives of human figures, but this is not a deficiency. It is an evocative feature of the Old Testament's narrative art that makes room for the reader to articulate imaginatively the narrative's emotional content.¹ The reader gives language to the emotion latent in Old Testament narrative. This is a constructively imaginative cycle compatible with the approach of Lederach. This feature of Old Testament narrative informed the design of the role-play exercises as the imaginative centerpiece of my training.

I begin this chapter with my criteria for selecting the texts to include in the training. The body of this chapter lays out the imaginative connection between the emotional motivations of the biblical figures, who are depicted in the texts' intragroup conflicts, and the conflict transformation skill we practiced during each respective session's role-play exercise. This imaginative connection between a narrative figure's emotions and a conflict transformation skill was the creative driver of each role-play. The chapter concludes with my analysis of how the hiddenness of God in each of these texts invites the training participants to apply their own theological imagination to the conflict in the text. It is because of God's hiddenness in the texts that the emotions of the biblical figure, the conflict transformation skill, and the theological language converge.

¹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 114–30.

3.1 Storm Vocabulary: Criteria for Text Selection

We engage the storms of local church conflict, which consist in language and emotions drawn from harmful theology, by speaking in a new way theologically that reduces harm. The Old Testament is our theological lexicon for this new form of storm-talk. As I explain in chapters 1–2, the Old Testament serves as the local church’s shared cultural resource on which leaders can draw to cultivate conflict preparedness. To build imaginative fluency in the Old Testament as a theological language, I have chosen texts for the five sessions based on the following criteria:

1. Potential for intertextual conversation. The selections include both prose and poetry, which I paired together to draw participants into the intertextual conversation of the Old Testament.² The goal was also to select a variety of biblical figures among whom there are intertextual connections. The prose texts serve as basis for the role-plays in a manner consonant with Lederach’s approach, prompting the participants’ imaginations so that they create new theological language for conflict. Poetry texts also served liturgically as the basis for our closing prayers in unison.
2. Familiarity and unfamiliarity. Some selections are more familiar to participants, such as Joseph and his brothers in Gen 37:12–28; 50:15–21, while other selections will be less familiar, such as Judg 12:1–6 and Ezra 9:1–10:19. Familiar texts give an accessible entry into the Old Testament’s theological language, while unfamiliar texts introduce theological expressions that broaden the participants’ theological vocabulary.
3. Potential for imaginative learning. Not all texts in the Old Testament are equally useful for preparing local church leaders’ theological imaginations for conflict. Because Lederach’s approach relies on creative elements such as narrative and drama, I selected prose texts with a plot that is simple enough to follow in no more than two readings. I selected poetry texts with images that lend to swift comprehension by a lay audience with minimal background

² Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying*, 107.

teaching. Most of the training is devoted to role-play exercises, conversation, and written reflection.

We grow in the cadences and accents of Old Testament fluency through creative exercises that help us imaginatively experience these texts. The imaginative experience of Old Testament conflict fosters conflict preparedness.

In order for our encounter with texts to reach the breadth of the canon's diversity, some of the passages we study contained violence. This decision to include violent texts is not made lightly. Daniel Stulac has shown by his work on the "gift of the grotesque" in Judges that even an encounter with the senseless violence in Old Testament texts can be used by God for a redemptive purpose.³ The provocative images of violence give us pause, so that we may reflect seriously on the ways in which conflict cycles lead human beings to act violently. As in Stulac's reading of the grotesque as a gift in Judges, I share the conviction that intragroup conflict is a difficult gift God gives to the church. We often misunderstand this gift because conflict disrupts the community for a time. But recognizing and responding to disruption are integral parts of conflict transformation.

3.2 Old Testament Weather Patterns: Exegeting the Texts to Articulate Motivations in Conflict Role-Plays

In the following section of this chapter, I give a brief exegetical comment on the scriptural texts chosen for each session, relating each narrative text to that session's conflict transformation skill the group practiced in the role-play. I developed dramatic motivations for the role-players from my exegesis. Since conflict is a storm of language and emotion, these

³ Daniel J. D. Stulac, *Gift of the Grotesque: A Christological Companion to the Book of Judges* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), 4.

motivations are the weather patterns of the Old Testament's human figures involved in conflict.

We study these weather patterns as we re-enact the narratives' conflicts.

Session 1 • Joseph and the Elder Brothers • Self-Awareness-in-Context (Conscientization) • Gen 37:12–28; 50:15–21 and Ps 133

Joseph is betrayed by his elder brothers, but many years later forgives them. I pair this narrative of brothers reuniting with the acclamation of kindred unity in Ps 133. The Joseph story serves as a hopeful example of forgiveness after many years of unresolved conflict.⁴ The psalmist echoes this hope with an allusion to reconciliation between the northern and southern kingdoms, likening the reunion to Hermon sharing its good weather with Zion in Ps 133:3.⁵ The Joseph narrative is ideal for the first session because Joseph exhibits a constructive process of reconciliation in the plot's conclusion. His reconciliation with his brothers contributes not only to his narrative but also to the narrative of Genesis as a whole.

The participants in the training hear Joseph proclaim the activity of God in this process of reconciliation (Gen 50:20). They role-play Joseph and his brothers in order to practice conscientization, so that they can experience the conflict along with its attendant emotions from their points of view.⁶ The participant playing Joseph imagines the tensions between past hurts and his desire to forgive. Those playing the brothers can imagine the interplay of fear and desperation they feel standing before their powerful younger brother whom they betrayed, but on whom they now depend for grain in the famine. The brothers learn a hard lesson that their actions in previous

⁴ Brent A Strawn, "The Slow Burn of Forgiveness: St. Joseph Preaches Lives Forgiveness," *Journal for Preachers* 45, no. 2 (2022): 35.

⁵ Adele Berlin, "On the Interpretation of Psalm 133," in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, ed. Elaine R. Follis, JSOT Supplement 40 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 145.

⁶ Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 112–13.

storm cycles of conflict bear upon their present situation. Joseph on the other hand gives credit to his God who miraculously transforms the storm cycles of conflict among the sons of Jacob into a fruitful outcome.

Motivations for Role-Players in Session 1: Joseph and the Elder Brothers

Joseph Toward his Elder Brothers

1. God has brought you through many hardships. You were left for dead in a pit, then sold into slavery (Gen 37:23–28), but have become the head of Potiphar’s household. (39:1–6) You survived prison after being falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife. (39:11–23) So you have learned that you are better off in the long-run when you take the high road. (40:12–15; 41:9–13, 39–43, 51–52; 45:5–13)
2. Since you were young, you have had dreams that one day your elder brothers would serve you. (37:1–9) Are you proud that you were right? Or do you regret that they have now gone through famine? (42:1–5)
3. You care for your brothers, but you are not afraid to play a prank on them. (42:8–44:34) You have a soft spot for your younger brother Benjamin and your father Jacob. (43:27, 29–30; 45:3)

Elder Brothers Toward Joseph

1. You realize that the dreams of your younger brother becoming greater than you came true. (37:1–9; 45:7–8)
2. You are desperate to stay in Joseph’s good graces, because he controls the supply of grain for the known world. (45:3, 15)
3. You do not know if you can trust your brother Joseph, given how he played a prank on you, causing you to fear for your lives, when you were just trying to purchase grain to carry back to Canaan. (42:8–44:34; 45:3)

Session 2 • The Shibboleth Kin-Slayings • Active Listening with Applied Paraphrasing • Judg 12:1–6 and Ps 55:12–14

The Shibboleth slayings serve as a cautionary tale about the ways in which the people of God turn against each other. The Ephraimites and Gileadites forget that their common interest is

to defend their land against the Ammonites. In a bit of dark linguistic comedy, the Gileadites use a slight difference in regional pronunciations to distinguish who is outside of their tribe. Evidently their differences are so minimal that this is the only way they can tell each other apart.⁷ The role-play features an imaginary meeting of the elders of the tribes of Ephraim and Gilead in which they attempt to resolve their differences. Judges 12:1–6 serves as a creative prompt for this role-play exercising the skill of applied paraphrasing by providing participants with two closely related tribes who are in extremely violent conflict.⁸ The over-the-top violence of this text provides the participants a chance to role-play with applied paraphrasing against a backdrop that is both challenging in terms of its content but also remote from the participants' lived experience. This dissimilar backdrop provides a critical distance from which the participants can reflect on their own conflicts. The session concludes with Ps 55:12–14 as a poetic echo of Judg 12:1–6, so that our group may mourn the times when God's people harm one another while caught in an escalating storm cycle together.⁹

Motivations for Role-Players in Session 2: The Tribal Elders

The Elders of Ephraim • Four Grievances with Gilead

1. The Gileadites' leader Jephthah did not call for you the last time the Gileadites fought your common enemy, the Ammonites. You are insulted that you were not invited to join the battle as an ally. (Judg 12:1)

⁷ Dennis T. Olson, "Judges," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 837–38.

⁸ Lederach, *Reconcile*, 118–19.

⁹ Gerald T. Sheppard, "'Enemies' and the Politics of Prayer in the Book of Psalms," in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, Rev. ed. (Ossining, NY: Orbis, 1993), 388. Sheppard argues that the enemies who are the focus of the imprecatory psalms may not always be distant foes but are just as likely to be close friends and relatives.

2. You look down on the Gileadites because they dwell on the east bank of the Jordan, making their habitation in the land of promise questionable. You also call into question the legitimacy of the Gileadites' heritage as true Israelites, a long-time point of controversy with Gilead. (12:4; see also Josh 22)¹⁰
3. Most recently, the Gileadites have defeated your soldiers and taken control of a ford at the Jordan River, which is the historic border of the land of promise. (Judg 12:4–5) Your ancestors crossed over the Jordan's parted waters with Joshua after they wandered in the wilderness forty years. (Josh 3:14–17) So you are insulted that the renegade Gileadites are killing your people at this historic ford.
4. Not only have the Gileadites taken control of the river ford, they killed your fellow Ephraimites on sight by testing you to see whether you say the word "Sibboleth" with your Ephraimite accent.¹¹ (Judg 12:5–6)

The Elders of Gilead • Four Grievances with Ephraim

1. The Ephraimites have insulted you by calling you fugitives. (12:4) You are indignant because your tribe has been a part of Israel since the days of Joshua. (see Josh 22)
2. The last time you needed help fighting the Ammonites, the Ephraimites did not answer your call. (Judg 12:2)
3. The Ephraimites have threatened your tribe, saying they will burn down your houses with you in them. (12:1)
4. Ephraimites are trespassing over into your territory then lying about who they are. So you make them say the word "Shibboleth" as a test, because you know they cannot say that word right. (12:5)

¹⁰ Robert B. Coote, "Joshua," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 706–8.

¹¹ Olson, "Judges," 837–38.

Session 3 • Ruth and Ezra • Episode Lens & Epicenter Lens • Ezra 9:1–10:19 and Ruth 1:16–18

The conflict about intermarriage in Ezra 9:1–10:19 poses a sensitive challenge to the participants. On one hand, Ezra convenes his fellow officials to study and resolve the conflict about intermarriage in an orderly process. On the other hand, their resolution involves breaking up families in a way that seems calloused. In order not to create a role-play situation in which the participants feel forced to do harm to women and children, this role-play takes the form of an imaginatively scripted conversation between Ezra and Ruth, in which the two discuss the tension between the need to be a set apart people, Ezra’s position, and the call of God to invite in the outsider, Ruth’s position.

Matthew Schlimm has written an imaginative dialogue between Ezra and Ruth that charitably expresses the theological and social concerns of them both.¹² Due to the difficult nature of the Ezra text’s approach to women and children, it seemed beneficial for his dialogue to serve as the script for this session’s role-play. The inclusion of Ruth as a woman faithful to the God of Israel in Ruth 1:16–18 is in theological tension with the Ezra text, in which women bear the burdens of the remnant community’s conflict and disobedience.

These texts illustrate Lederach’s dual-lens skill that he calls the “episode lens” and “epicenter lens.”¹³ The Ezra text illustrates the episode lens in that it features a conventional conflict resolution process, focused on symptoms. However, when held in tension with the Ruth text, we see that the Old Testament also provides us with an epicenter lens, a view into the root

¹² Matthew R. Schlimm, *This Strange and Sacred Scripture: Wrestling with the Old Testament and Its Oddities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 220–23, Kindle.

¹³ Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 61–67.

moral issue of how to incorporate an outsider into one's community without causing the community to disintegrate. The Old Testament provides a contemplative eye into its own conflict storm by including theological voices that are in dispute with one another.

Session 4 • David, Nabal, and Abigail • Centered Speaking: 1 Sam 25:2–42 and Ps 23:5

David is fondly remembered by many Christians for his childhood heroism against Goliath (1 Sam 17), his handsomeness as a young shepherd (16:10–13), his soothing lyre (16:23), and for being a “man after [God’s] own heart” (13:14). However, fewer Christians have a theological imagination that holds these admirable images of David in tension with narratives of David’s temper and violent aggression. The narrative of David, Abigail, and Nabal offers participants a discordant note in the Davidic melody, because we see David’s temper and his bloodthirst for revenge against Nabal. Abigail intervenes as a peacemaker in such a profound way that for once David stands in someone else’s shadow.

To build fluency in the Old Testament, this text is important because it complicates the picture of David’s moral character. David is not sinless, nor are his motives pure. The twist in this narrative is that enraged David is unmistakably the foil to Abigail the peacemaker. Other narratives in which David does violence do not feature a peacemaker like Abigail who stands in contrast to David (e.g.: David’s unimpeded raids on the Philistines and Amalekites in 27:1–30:20). As such, it is easy for the casual reader to ascribe just causes to David whenever he sheds blood. The narrative of Abigail making peace between David and Nabal complicates the image of David as an unstoppable just warrior.

Psalm 23:5 also puts David’s encounter with Abigail in a new light. Abigail honors the guest-host covenant by preparing a table for David and his soldiers in order to make peace and

keep bloodshed away from the house of Nabal (1 Sam 25:18).¹⁴ David can truly say that a table has been prepared “in the presence of my enemies” (Ps 23:5). The participants in our training see how the paradox of table fellowship with our enemies is a resounding theological voice in the Old Testament. Abigail, the wife of David’s enemy, offers the food that David’s soldiers badly need. In doing so, Abigail transforms the conflict between David and Nabal, such that David repents of the violence he intended on the house of Nabal. As David and Abigail discuss his change of heart, Abigail helps David understand the stain that this bloodshed would have left on his coming reign (25:30–31). Abigail’s monologue in the narrative serves as a model for centered speaking (25:24–31), because she takes responsibility for the transformation of the conflict instead of leaving it to David and Nabal.¹⁵ Abigail calms the storm by accompanying her healing speech with gifts from her table. Otherwise, David and Nabal would have churned up a massacre.

Motivations for Role-Players in Session 4: David, Nabal, and Abigail

David’s Motivations

1. hunger (1 Sam 25:8)
2. anger at being denied hospitality after he cared for Nabal’s shepherds (25:4–12)
3. desire to shed blood, as David is wont to do when someone gets in his way (see 2 Sam 1:1–16; 11:14–27)

¹⁴ Andrew E. Arterbury, “Hospitality,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine D. Sakenfeld, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 901; Jessica T. Devega, “Guest,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine D. Sakenfeld, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 700; Mary Shields, “A Feast Fit for a King: Food and Drink in the Abigail Story,” in *The Fate of King David: The Past and Present of a Biblical Icon*, ed. Tod Linafelt, Claudia V. Camp, and Timothy Beal, *The Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies* 500 (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 38–54.

¹⁵ Schrock-Shenk, “Centered Communication,” 140–41.

Nabal's Motivation

1. pride in his wealth and stinginess in his business dealings (1 Sam 25:2–3)

Abigail's Motivations

1. urgency, due to the soldiers of David on their way to slay all the males of Nabal's house (25:12–19, 21–22)
2. wisdom of a peacemaker (25:24–31)

Session 5 • Jacob and Esau • Encounter • Gen 32:1–33:17 and Ps 85:10

Jacob and Esau's encounter with one another is juxtaposed with Jacob's encounter with God at the ford of the Jabbok. Jacob and Esau's reunion also echoes other narratives of sibling strife in Genesis. Their reconciliation is a hopeful counterpoint to Cain's murder of Abel (Gen 4:1–16) and a presage of Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers who betrayed him (37:2–36; 42:1–45:24; 46:31–47:12; 50:15–21). The intertextuality of this narrative helps the participants in this training hear the voices within the Old Testament holding a theological conversation. The trainer may draw attention to these voices to build the participants' theological fluency.

Lederach himself interprets the Jacob-Esau text to show the theological value of the encounter with an enemy. In the process of encountering Esau, Jacob also encounters the presence of God as an elusive wrestler who exposes Jacob's human vulnerability. Jacob's injury is proof of his risky meeting with God (32:25–30). Having proclaimed God's presence with theological speech in the night (32:30), Jacob risks an encounter with Esau the next morning that transforms their stormy relationship.¹⁶ The morning sky is clear.

¹⁶ Lederach, *Reconcile*, 40–42.

Motivations for Role-Players in Session 5: Jacob and Esau

Jacob's Motivations

1. fear for your family and all your possessions (Gen 32:7)
2. determination, you need to pass through Esau's territory (31:51–32:1, 9; 33:18)
3. faint hope that your brother has softened toward you (32:5)
4. must walk with a limp (32:31)
5. probably hurts when Esau embraces you, due to your wrestling injury (33:4)
6. overwhelmed, weeping with Esau (33:4)

Esau's Motivations

1. pain from having your blessing stolen many years ago (27:1–40)
2. sadness, missing your wandering brother (33:12)
3. oblivious that your embrace hurts Jacob due to his wrestling injury (33:4)
4. overwhelmed, weeping with Jacob (33:4)

3.3 God's Hidden Activity in the Intragroup Storms of the Old Testament

In these texts of intragroup conflict, the activity of God is rarely obvious. God acts, but the signs of divine action are elusive like Jacob's injury, which was given him under cover of night. This is an interesting feature setting these texts apart from other texts I might have chosen, in which God acts in an unambiguous way. To consider a few counterexamples, God acts overtly as an arbitrator when Miriam and Aaron have conflict with Moses in Num 12. God intervenes dramatically on behalf of Elijah during the intragroup conflict between Elijah—true prophet of Israel—and Ahab's false prophets in 1 Kgs 18. God acts decisively in Davidic narratives when David is engaged in intragroup conflict. Sometimes God supports David, as in David's conflict

with Saul (1 Sam 15:10–16:13). God also opposes David at other times, such as in 2 Sam 12 when God afflicts the first child of David and Bathsheba. The narration and the divine signs in those texts make clear God's intervention in the conflict. There is a strong sense in those texts that God takes a side and settles the conflict by divine action.

But by contrast, in the five passages I have selected, God's activity is hidden. The action is only revealed to the reader if a person in the narrative articulates God's action with theological speech. Two of the five cases are contrasting examples of this principle. In the case of Joseph's ascension to power in Egypt, we only know of God's activity because Joseph proclaims it (Gen 50:20). Joseph reveals God's action with theological language. However, by contrast in Judg 12:1–6, the activity of God is completely occluded by the tragic violence of Gilead and Ephraim's infighting. It is left to the reader to articulate what God's activity may be. Perhaps senseless violence is what happens when God is not invited to intervene, or when God withdraws the divine hand from conflict.

Similarly, God does not personally appear in the narrative of Ezra 9:1–10:19. The response of Ezra and his leaders to the problem of intermarriage is an act of repentance based on their discernment that God is displeased. The reader must articulate to what extent God is involved in their resolution of the conflict. Perhaps it is no surprise then that the Book of Ruth also addresses the problem of intermarriage, likewise without narrating the overt action of God. Like Ezra himself in 9:6–15, Ruth the Moabite woman declares her loyalty to God (Ruth 1:15). However, Ruth and Ezra's narratives differ in that God clandestinely responds to Ruth's faith by securing offspring in her intermarriage with Boaz (Ruth 4:13). God's work here is revealed by the narrator and alluded to in the blessing given to Ruth by the people at the gate of Bethlehem (4:11–13). By contrast, Ezra's narrative ends tersely at the point that the intermarriages are

severed. The reader must surmise what God does in response to the conflict within Ezra's remnant community.

The texts of 1 Sam 25:2–42 and Gen 32:1–32:17 strike a middle way between the taciturnity of Judg 12:1–6 and the triumphalism of Gen 50:15–21. In 1 Sam 25:2–42, according to David's declaration, God sent Abigail with wise speech and peaceful gestures to resolve David's conflict with Nabal (25:32–34).¹⁷ However, God does not directly intervene except to strike Nabal dead as the narrative draws to a close (25:38). God's fatal strike against Nabal is silent. In killing Nabal, God neither appears nor speaks. The purpose of God's action is only revealed when David acclaim God in 25:39 for judging Nabal. Furthermore, God does not reconcile David and Nabal, but saves human life through Abigail instead. This activity of God is only revealed by David's acclamation (25:32–34), similar to David's later speech in 25:39. Unlike Joseph, who is always highly aware that God's hand is on him, Abigail declares the ways in which God's hand is on David, not herself (25:26–31). Likewise, the involvement of God with Jacob and Esau's conflict in Gen 32:1–33:17 is highly evocative but also elusive. The reader is left to discern how exactly God's mysterious and injurious involvement with Jacob at the fords of the Jabbok transforms Jacob's encounter with his brother Esau. These two texts open wide the theological imagination of the reader.

Though God's hiddenness is puzzling, in the leader training I have developed with these five texts, the hiddenness of God's activity is not a hermeneutical problem so much as it is a theological feature. God's hiddenness makes space for a pastor and leaders to engage the conflict in the text because God does not appear in the narrative to arbitrate the conflict overtly. As

¹⁷ Bruce C. Birch, "1 Samuel," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 1169.

Christians who take the inspiration of Scripture seriously, we are left to wrestle with what the hiddenness of God's action might mean for us as we attempt to respond to our own conflicts in the local church. Where is God at work in our own conflict?

Articulating the hidden activity of God is an important exercise for acquiring imaginative fluency in the Old Testament's theological language.¹⁸ This imaginative space in the Old Testament's narratives gives pastors and leaders room to practice conflict transformation skills by engaging the human emotions and motivations of the figures in the text. The texts exercise our capacity to articulate God's activity through conversation, role-play, and writing. We begin to appreciate the value of conflict storm cycles for the beneficial rain the storm brings. If local church conflict is a storm of language and emotion, this newfound theological fluency is a helpful rain-catcher. As we Christians articulate our conflicts with helpful theological language, we prepare to benefit from the rain of conflict before we hear the first thunderclap.

The following chapter begins a four-chapter examination of the elements of conflict preparedness. I lift up the first element, imaginative theological fluency, from the participants' written responses in order to show how the imaginative exegetical work of this previous chapter comes to fruition after the group's creative training exercises. For outlines of my training course's contents, see Appendix A.

¹⁸ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 318, 338, 352, 356–58. Brueggemann argues that the hiddenness of God is not the same as absence. Rather, Israel claims God's hiddenness as the "inscrutability" of God's power (357).

4. Imaginative Theological Fluency: Speaking the Old Testament's Stormy Language

The storms of local church conflict have a theological character. The surface level issue of a conflict might seem petty—the color of the carpet. But the people caught in that conflict use language that carries theological concerns—God's will, right order, faithfulness, witness, heritage, and mission. A constructive conflict process needs to resonate theologically with a church's culture. This requirement makes conflict transformation different for a church than for other organizations.¹ That difference needs to be respected, and adjustments in the approach to church conflict need to be made, similar to how adjustments are made in conflict transformation with ethnic groups and families in which generational ties give shape to group identity. We need good stormy language that is also theological.

To attempt imaginative conflict transformation in the church with no theological language would be to introduce a practice that has no resonance with the church.² A pastor can draw from Scripture to make that critical adjustment in conflict transformation for the sake of the local church. Just as reviving a family tradition can enrich a community's life and build peace after strife, my study's participants articulate conflict preparedness in the theological language of the Old Testament in order to recover a piece of the church's theological heritage. The Old Testament becomes more than a static memorial. Its theological language becomes imaginative and practical. The beneficial rain from transformed conflict nourishes the local church because the Old Testament's theological language has been spoken once again.³

¹ Lederach and Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*, 97–100.

² Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 10.

³ Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying*, 236–42.

In the first half of this chapter, I discuss how the theological language of the Old Testament encourages a humility that opens the participants up for reimagining their approaches to conflict. I then discuss the stormy, disputatious nature of the Old Testament's theological language for its resonant value in conflict training. I compare this resonant value to the imaginative work of learning to converse in a second language, a creative but humbling experience. The second half of the chapter interprets the responses of the participants from each of the five sessions as evidence that my training cultivates this first element of conflict preparedness in the church: imaginative theological fluency.

4.1. Humility and Openness to Old Testament Fluency

In Strawn's metaphor comparing the recovery of the Old Testament to language acquisition, he avoids treating the Old Testament as an object that might be grasped, or as a set of facts that may be learned by rote, but instead as a theological language in which we may grow more fluent—even artful. A participant in my training learns this theological language by practicing it in conversation with others.⁴ The metaphor of the Old Testament as a language is beneficial because the metaphor helps training participants recognize this humble starting point in our conversational abilities. In our training, we do not create this language, any more than we create rain. We need to grow into this theological language because we are novices in its sounds and rudiments. This new way of articulation is humbling. However, if we remain open, we can articulate theologically.⁵

⁴ Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying*, 173–75.

⁵ John Paul Lederach, *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1999), 182.

Training participants are generally more comfortable with New Testament texts, so the advantage of using the Old Testament as our conversation partner is that most participants readily admit they are unfamiliar with the texts we read together. Their humility facilitates a potent atmosphere for conflict training. Conscientious participants want to address their unfamiliarity with Scripture. Their desire to grow in fluency with the theological language of Scripture provides them with motivation to train in conflict preparedness more fully than they might have in a conventional workshop on conflict.

With increased fluency, participants in my training were able to rely more on the theological language of the Old Testament as the training progressed. The Old Testament became an imaginative resource for future rainy seasons. What began as exercises in humility transformed into productive theological conversation about the weather of conflict.

4.2. The Old Testament's Linguistic Resonance with Conflict Preparedness

The theological connection between Old Testament fluency and intragroup conflict preparedness may require further warrant. Here I will provide two warrants for what Lederach would call “resonant” benefits between Old Testament fluency and intragroup conflict preparedness.⁶ These warrants are the transformative contact points at which the conflict storms of language and emotion meet the rain of theological speech in the local church.

4.2.1 The Old Testament's Resonant Conflicts

The first warrant is that our own conflict behaviors as Christians are echoed within the Old Testament's narratives. Conflict makes a narrative engaging. Intragroup conflict makes a

⁶ Lederach and Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*, 97–100.

narrative even more engaging, because the reader feels the relational tensions of people who are paradoxically bound together but also driven apart. This paradox of intragroup conflict in a narrative takes the reader on an empathic journey. The Old Testament is filled with such intragroup conflicts in which a reader's empathy converges with the theological imagination.

By understanding the intragroup conflicts of the Old Testament, we tap the theological imagination of our scriptural heritage. As Christians grafted into God's people (see Isa 2:3; 11:10; 56:4–8; Rom 11:17–21), we cannot prepare wisely for our own intragroup church conflicts without understanding the narratives of intragroup conflict from our theological forebears. As people of God who resonate with God's calling of Israel, we Christians are doing more than mere background reading when we grow in Old Testament fluency. We are reading the inspired narratives of conflicts among God's people. The people of God in Scripture endured many storms. Even still the call of God continues to resound all the way down to the local church, sustaining and directing God's people.

I take the work of Walter Brueggemann to be on a trajectory similar to Strawn, inasmuch as Brueggemann and Strawn both employ the working metaphors of speech, conversation, and language to describe Old Testament theology. Brueggemann has made the case that a feature of the Old Testament is its resonant internal disputes. Intragroup conflict is articulated in the Old Testament's theological language.

Brueggemann reads the Old Testament in such a way that the Old Testament's productively tensive, disputatious speech is not a flaw. Instead Brueggemann argues that productive disputation is essential to the Old Testament's theological imagination. Internal dispute is the medium of expression for the Old Testament's artistic genius. The disputatious character of the Old Testament is also distinct within the scriptural canon. While the New Testament certainly contains intragroup conflict and disputation, we do not observe intragroup

disputation in the New Testament to the same extent Brueggemann has identified in the Old Testament.⁷ Unlike the New Testament, intragroup theological disputation is one of the features of the Old Testament that makes its texts speak a conversation with one another.⁸ In short, intragroup conflict is what the Old Testament's theological language is made for. This feature makes that theological language resonate with conflicts in the local church.

However, since the Old Testament's theological language is indeed dying, as Strawn has demonstrated,⁹ that theological language is unfamiliar and intimidating to new language learners. I adapt Brueggemann and Strawn's linguistic metaphor to Lederach's imaginative approach to provide an accessible entry for participants into the Old Testament's vast theological language. This need for accessibility is why I connect Old Testament texts of intragroup conflict to skills of conflict preparedness that participants develop in my training.¹⁰ I turn the imaginative language toward a practical purpose. Brueggemann has argued that the texts of the Old Testament testify to Israel's God through a canonical contention, an extended intragroup dispute that Israel has with itself within its own Scripture. These disputatious conversations are that accessible confluence we need between theological language and conflict, because Scripture itself invites the reader to speak its language as we weigh in on these intragroup disputes.¹¹

A resonance grows between the voices in the Old Testament and our own as we engage the Old Testament in conversation using Lederach's conflict transformation skills. In each session

⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 317–18.

⁸ Brueggemann, 710.

⁹ Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying*, 71–80.

¹⁰ Lederach, *Building Peace*, 14–15, 109.

¹¹ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 78–80, 317–20.

I paired Old Testament texts of narrative prose and poetry to help the participants imagine a conversation between a few of the Old Testament's voices. The intragroup conversation among those voices can also produce resonant conversation among participants who are learning the language. While imagining ourselves inside these Old Testament conflicts through role-play and conversation, we build our imaginative theological fluency.

4.2.2 The Resonant Community of New Language Learners

The second warrant connecting this theological language with conflict has to do with the role a community plays in the imaginative work of language acquisition. Fluency in any language is developed by continually communicating within a community toward useful purposes. I would suggest that a shared community is the *sine qua non* of fluency, whether fluency in a language or fluency in the Old Testament.¹² With a living language, there are myriad dimensions of fluency. So too, there are many dimensions of fluency at play when the people of a local church revive the theological language of the Old Testament with one another. The Old Testament gives us its gift of articulacy so that we can speak theologically about the spiritual experience of intragroup conflict in the community that is the church.

To further illustrate the warrant of linguistic resonance in community, the training sessions I developed might be likened to conversational language classes. In a conversational language class, we surround ourselves with a community of fellow language learners to practice conversation with each other. We may trust to grace that those of us in a training such as mine already know bits and pieces of this language, though our skills are rusty. By applying the Old

¹² Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying*, 120, 236.

Testament's theological language to a specific objective—conflict preparedness— we make this a training in which we build conversational fluency on top of what basic skills we already have.

Conversational language is a resonant “sonic metaphor” compatible with Lederach’s approach. Conversations among new language learners in community have sonic repetition as the learners repeat phrases to one another to ensure comprehension.¹³ This repetition of vocalized sound is resonant. It is cyclical rather than linear.¹⁴ In a conversational language class, students repeatedly role-play commonplace scenarios. We could imagine a scenario in which a language student has to travel using a public bus to a grocery store to purchase a list of items, while using only the target language. In that scenario, the hard skills of language, the practical sense required by the objective, and the imaginative intuition of the role-play are all three interdependent processes required to adapt to the social settings of the bus and the store. The scenario is imaginary but also practically relevant for the student. We can identify these three interdependent processes as essential to a community of learners gaining conversational fluency.

The learner develops fluency by repetitive practice of those interdependent processes in creative new scenarios with the community.¹⁵ To navigate a role-play in the target language, the learner cannot rely on rote memorization alone, because each creative scenario requires new expression. The person gaining fluency needs to adapt their language to the demands of the scenario, using what cultural and linguistic assets the learner already has.¹⁶ In my training the role-playing exercises cultivate an imaginative atmosphere for fluency analogous to that of the

¹³ Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying*, 216–22, 230–31.

¹⁴ Lederach and Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*, 7.

¹⁵ Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying*, 204.

¹⁶ Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 73–83.

conversational language class. We immerse ourselves into the theological language of the Old Testament with its narratives, persons, places, and conflicts. This imaginative approach is what distinguishes my training from a more conventional Bible study exposing learners to content only. We are in a resonant community space. Our theological speech echoes the rain from the storms of conflict.

Among all the dimensions of the Old Testament's theological language, the Old Testament's depictions of intragroup conflict are a dimension frequently ignored in the local church. Our neglect of this scriptural witness is one cause of our unpreparedness for our own conflict. We have forgotten how to speak theologically to one another, so we cannot communicate well enough to prepare for conflict together, much less communicate during conflict. Once the storm hits and tempers are high, it is too late to learn a shared theological language. That is why intragroup conflict preparedness requires local church leaders to build fluency during a season of relative calm.

Preparedness is a capacity that by nature can only be developed in advance of a future event, by articulating lessons from relevant past events. This imaginative capacity is what makes fluency in a theological language necessary. Without the imaginative capacity, the church cannot prepare for future conflict. Without the requisite grammar of the theological language, there is no medium of expression for the imagination. The relationship between the imagination, the language, and preparation is non-linear, because the three are interdependent.¹⁷ But when developed together, there is resonance among these three. Because of this resonance, this

¹⁷ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 7–19. Lederach offers four narratives in which imagination, language, and conflict preparation are interdependent. From this interdependence, new responses emerge to transform stubborn conflicts.

imaginative training in conflict preparedness builds fluency in the Old Testament's theological language, in the sense that Strawn suggests. The application of the language to the community's practical problem of conflict abets our community's fluency. It is a constructive cycle.

4.3 Imaginative Theological Fluency Discovered in the Training

In this section I analyze the written responses of the participants from each session for signs they were building fluency in the Old Testament's theological language. For further information on my methodology, the written prompts, and my reference system for participant responses, see Appendix B. I close the chapter with a brief discussion of how articulacy in theological language brings meaning to a church's experience of its own conflicts.

4.3.1 Fluency in Session 1 • Joseph and the Elder Brothers • Gen 37:12–28; 50:15–21; Ps 133

The participants, like Joseph, credit God with subverting the jealous cruelty of the elder brothers to create good out of a tragic sibling conflict (Gen 50:20). This participant traces how God thwarted the brothers' jealousy:

Jealousy ends up making the brothers sin and sell their brother Joseph into slavery. (10, S1, R2.1)

The brothers are jealous of Joseph, but God took their jealousy, the conflict, and brought good out of it by saving many people and restoring relationships. (R2.2)

Both this participant's responses identify jealousy as the driver of the brothers' conflict, but in R2.2 the participant further articulates the work of God in the narrative. This is a step toward fluency in the Old Testament, because by tracking with the narrative, the participant is able to imagine what good God can bring out of destructive conflict. Even though the brothers'

actions are unadmirable, in forgiving them Joseph opens up our theological imaginations about the greater purposes of God. The text's narrative artistry invites such theological engagement.¹⁸

Many of the participants envisioned God teaching us as readers about grace through Joseph's forgiveness (4, S1, R3.1). This personal application of the text happened frequently in the R3 of all the sessions, but especially in session 1, suggesting that our role play of Joseph and the elder brothers broke the fourth wall of the narrative as we read Gen 50 for a second time. Granted, Joseph's speech does not literally break the fourth wall of the narrative. Even in Joseph's strong theological statement in 50:19–20 he addresses his brothers, not the reader. However, by role playing that climactic speech, the participants experienced how Joseph's speech culminates the narrative. In the second reading of the text after the role play, the participants were able to imagine themselves in the room overhearing Joseph as he forgives the elder brothers. I found this immersive effect produced by our imaginative role play to be in concert with Strawn's interpretation of Joseph as a preacher of forgiveness.¹⁹ This participant expresses well the change produced in the group by our imaginative engagement with the text, "Try to be like Joseph. Show God's love even though the brothers did not deserve it, like God forgives us even when we do not deserve forgiveness" (5, S1, R4).

In session 1 the participants were able to make many personal applications to conflict in their own lives, drawing from Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers and God's activity in helping the family reunite. There was a common thread in the participants' references to God "teaching" in this passage, even though God does not overtly act or speak. The hiddenness of God in the

¹⁸ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 114–15.

¹⁹ Strawn, "The Slow Burn of Forgiveness," 38–39.

Joseph narrative is what makes the Joseph narrative applicable to the participants' own lives. We may not claim the direct action of God during conflict, but we may still discern that God is at work within us. The Joseph narrative provides many points of contact for the participants to imagine analogies to conflict in their own lives and to show grace, as God does, through Joseph's transformation of the conflict with his brothers.

4.3.2 Fluency in Session 2 • The Shibboleth Kin-Slayings • Judg 12:1–6; Ps 55:12–14

The text of Judg 12 presented a more challenging group activity, in that the names of the tribes and the plot were unfamiliar. However, this did not deter the participants from using their imagination. One participant summarizes the passage, “A bunch of men wanting to fight. I feel like these are different gangs fighting over territory” (17, S2, R1.1). The participant humorously notices the preoccupation of this text with male flaws and proclivities toward violence. The participant analogizes the dynamic of tribal fighting to the tragedy of gang warfare, picking up on the senseless waste of human life that results from violent group rivalries.

As in session 1, some participants noticed God being involved directly with what we were learning as we studied these passages together. One participant saw God in this passage as, “Wanting to get people to work together” (13, S2, R3.2). The participant imaginatively saw the desire of God for peace, even though that desire had not become reality among the tribes.

This passage was difficult but stretched the participants in their grasp of the variety of ways in which the Old Testament narrates Israel's life, God's activity, and God's hiddenness. Unlike the Joseph narrative in which readers can associate Christ-like qualities with Joseph, the participants' responses did not achieve consensus about God's activity in the narrative. Despite the text's difficulty and the somber conclusion of the narrative, the participants' responses revealed that they engaged the challenge of the text with all its ambiguity and pain. We shared a

humbling experience in which we felt that we had not perfectly understood the text's import. We were unsettled. Not all Old Testament texts provide a sense of immediate comfort.²⁰ To read a difficult text and abide in its challenges is one of the gifts that the Old Testament presents to us on the way toward fluency.²¹

4.3.3 Fluency in Session 3 • Ruth and Ezra • Ezra 9:1–10:19; Ruth 1:16–18

Session 3 was the most sensitive in the entire training. I felt that it would be best for Ezra 9:1–10:19 to be featured in the middle of the course, in order for us to hold this passage between the bookends of Joseph reconciling with his brothers in session 1 and the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau in session 5. This placement helped us warm up for the challenging Ezra-Ruth pairing and gave emotional space to decompress for two more sessions after encountering it.

The Ezra and Ruth texts are the most tense intertextual pairing among all the selections. The Schlimm dialogue read aloud by “Ezra” and “Ruth” provided an excellent example of the intertextual conversation of voices in the Old Testament. Schlimm’s dialogue modeled for the participants how to have a conversation in that language.²² The nature of the harm done to families, especially to women and children, gave the participants significant pause.

Though sensitive, the tension between the Ezra and Ruth texts was highly productive in fostering theological imagination and fluency. Many participants’ responses tended to side with either Ezra or Ruth as God’s agent. The participants who sided with Ezra saw the importance of God preserving true worship. The participants who sided with Ruth felt that giving compassion to

²⁰ Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying*, 10–11.

²¹ Strawn, 118–21.

²² Schlimm, *This Strange and Sacred Scripture*, 220–23.

the women and children of the intermarriages was God's invitation to show grace, even though Ezra rejected that quiet invitation. One participant picked up on the dialectic between "law vs. grace" in these two passages (10, S3, R2.2). It is significant that this participant saw this dialectic within the Old Testament itself and not as a simplistic conflation of the Old Testament with "law" and the New Testament as "grace." While those of us trained in biblical studies might further press against this dialectic by contending that Old Testament law is itself an expression of God's grace to Israel, I do not want to take away from the significance of the participants' discovery that the Old Testament itself contains a tension between God's commandment and God's mercy.

Training with the Ezra text demonstrated that unfamiliar texts can spark the theological imagination in new ways that familiar texts would not. One participant was interested in the idea behind the text that foreign gods were leading the remnant astray "as pawns" by manipulating them into intermarriages (7, S3, R1.2). This is an imaginative extension of the crisis in the narrative, to notice false gods leading people astray. Warnings against false gods are an important piece of the Old Testament's theological grammar. This participant was also imaginatively attuned to the hidden work of God in the other texts. Here we see that this person is even able to imagine the hidden activity of false gods as well.

Though the Ezra text was unfamiliar before the session began, after pairing Ezra with Ruth for conversation, the Ezra text was hard to forget. This pairing offers an effective example of intragroup disputation that is a signature of the Old Testament's theological language.²³

²³ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 85; Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying*, 9.

4.3.4 Fluency in Session 4 • David, Nabal, and Abigail • 1 Sam 25:2–42; Ps 25:3

A slight majority of the theological imaginings from session 4 had to do with God's punishment of Nabal. Participants drew an analogy between God's vindication of David through the punishment of Nabal to their own need to let go of revenge and let God handle difficult people. Participants often thought this passage conveys a hope that God will take revenge on those who have wronged us, rather than hoping that our enemy would prosper. One participant insightfully responded about Nabal's demise, "If Nabal had helped David a little, he could have been great" (2, S4, R1.2). This is a very imaginative response! The participant imagines that Nabal might have had a brighter future had he cooperated with David. Perhaps this narrative could be read as the tragedy of Nabal's conflict?

Several participants noticed how the guest-host covenant can strain even the generous. One participant called the guest-host covenant "overwhelming," showing imaginative empathy to Nabal for how difficult it would have been to host David's many soldiers (7, S4, R2.2). On the other hand, some participants recognized that the guest-host covenant had a weight of tradition that would justly cause David to feel anger when he was rejected. The participants' ability to notice the cultural tensions motivating figures in the Old Testament was an expression of their growing fluency.

The group overwhelmingly favored Abigail as a peacemaker, an eloquent example of a woman who cultivated peace in the Old Testament. It is important that, while the text only assigns God's overt activity to the death of Nabal (1 Sam 25:38), some participants imaginatively tied God's hidden activity to Abigail's peaceful intervention, as does David himself (25:32–34). One even noticed the divine will in the way the narrative sets up the marriage of Abigail to David. If this is the tragedy of Nabal, it is also the narrative of Abigail's ascension.

Regarding God's activity toward David, one participant perceptively imagined how David's rage against Nabal was putting David into conflict with God, but that "Abigail showed him the right path" (18, S4, R2.2). David is delivered from God's wrath by Abigail. This response exhibits an imaginative extension of alternative endings to the narrative. Perhaps after this conflict it would have been David who met his end, not only Nabal? This imaginative response is also congruent with warnings against the needless shedding of blood elsewhere in Old Testament narratives (Gen 4:10; Deut 19:10; 1 Sam 24:5–7; 26:9; 2 Sam 12:9; 1 Chr 28:3; Ps 106:38; Prov 1:16). God was at work developing David's character. Abigail was God's instrument.

Many participants correlated Abigail's peacemaking with God's work, but many other participants felt that God's primary action in the narrative was to punish Nabal with death. Training with this passage necessarily involves participants imagining how God punishes the foolish and the wicked. The challenge for the trainer in this text is that few participants will readily imagine themselves as Nabal on the receiving end of God's punishment. Future training with this text might benefit from paying closer attention to God's hidden activity in curbing David's anger rather than the punishment of Nabal's folly.

4.3.5 Fluency in Session 5 • Jacob and Esau • Gen 32:1– 33:17; Ps 85:10

The concluding session 5 featured the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau. As the Joseph text was productive for opening session 1, the Jacob-Esau text proved to be effective as a conclusion in session 5. The move back to an earlier point in the Old Testament's narrative gave us a new perspective on all the texts we had read in prior sessions. The participants encountered

Gen 32:1–33:17 retrospectively in the manner that Lederach describes as “the past that lies before us.”²⁴

Though we had interesting conversation about God’s involvement in the wrestling match at the Jabbok (Gen 32:22–32), in the participants’ written responses they imagined that God worked through Esau’s posture toward his brother. The participants saw God humbling Jacob by injuring him. But the ultimate intention of God is expressed through Esau, who embodies God’s desire for reconciliation. One respondent saw this reconciliation as the work of the Holy Spirit. Another participant responded that God is “watching and helping while looking over their shoulder” (2, S5, R3.2). This response is an incredible example of theological imagination, in which God is envisioned at the shoulder of both brothers, helping them reconcile. Over the course of the five sessions, this participant demonstrated a marked increase in articulacy and use of evocative imagery. Their imaginative response in session 5 demonstrates how much development can be accomplished in a training course. While the participants saw God directing Esau to forgive, God’s miracle with the trickster Jacob is that he shows up at all to the meeting! The sense from the responses was that Jacob had far more to learn about reconciliation than Esau did. Esau lived in a posture of attunement to the desire of God for reconciliation.

Here in Gen 32:1–33:17, as in the Joseph narrative, the participants were quick to make personal applications of God’s work to themselves, jumping from a description of God’s activity to God’s imperative to forgive. One participant noticed in both the Jacob-Esau and Joseph passages the overarching concern for reconciliation within families. As we reflected back—and ahead—to the Joseph narrative from session 1, we saw the culmination of the book of Genesis in

²⁴ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 131–49.

the reunion of the children of Jacob. The participants imaginatively saw what God was up to not only with Jacob, but with the community of Jacob's family.

4.4 Conclusion on Fluency: Articulating What Is Possible with God in the Storm

In the selections of my Bible study, the hiddenness of God gives readers space to imagine how God is involved in the storms of human conflict. Hiddenness is how Scripture invites us to imagine where God is working in the narrative. When we read Old Testament narratives of intragroup conflict, we find that God's activity is at least partially occluded. But even in God's hiddenness, God provides the people in the narrative what Lederach calls the "relational space," in which there is opportunity for people to transform their conflict.²⁵ Some biblical figures transform their conflict destructively, such as Ephraim and Gilead in Judg 12:1–6. Others transform conflict into reconciliation, such as Joseph, Esau, and Jacob. It is not a stretch to say that this hiddenness of God is a typical feature of intragroup reconciliation in the Old Testament. A trainer who utilizes Old Testament passages for the purpose of intragroup conflict preparedness may do well to select a variety of passages that feature God's hiddenness. The imaginative space of God's hiddenness makes room for constructive relational processes.

Many people are anxious about conflict in the local church, as if it were an approaching hurricane. A hurricane forces evacuation, driving people away from one another. Yet like the storm, conflict is an inevitable part of community life for which leaders must prepare. Disastrous weather becomes a part of a community's history and identity, the makings of a tale of resilience, or the beginning of the end. The storm is the event, but the community creates meaning out of

²⁵ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 75.

that event. So too with conflict, if local church leaders instinctively know that conflict should have a meaning but lack the articulacy to put that meaning into words, the pain, grief, anger, and resentment of local church conflict does not find productive expression. Our theological imagination lies dormant. In those cases, there is an unarticulated sense that these uncomfortable emotions and strained relationships ought not be the whole meaning of the church's life.

God's hiddenness unarticulated feels like God's absence, so the church in conflict stammers and stumbles toward meaninglessness. But in these five engagements with texts from the Old Testament, we employed our imaginations to discover that God is involved in the intragroup conflicts of the Old Testament, even when God seems hidden. Finding God to be hidden but resonant in the actions of the biblical figures in conflict, the participants were able to discern where God may be working within their own conflicts. Our imaginations began to resonate with theological possibility.

As participants repeatedly entered into the imaginative field for training, we were freed up to practice conflict transformation skills without the pressure of dealing with any present conflicts the participants were facing. In the next chapter I look at the evidence for participants' growth in conflict transformation skills. Their growth in skill was possible because the Old Testament texts were freeing up their theological imagination and their language for new constructive cycles.

5. Conflict Transformation Skills: Imaginative Storm Training within Old Testament Narratives

For leaders and their pastors to work together in storm cycles of conflict, they need to have a grasp of a shared conflict transformation skillset. The goal of skill acquisition is not perfection but practice. Repeated work with these skills begins a new constructive cycle. When a leader receives an angry phone call, these cycles of practice will have already prepared the leader for the relational weather coming their way.

In each session we trained to develop a conflict transformation skill endorsed by Lederach. The role-plays were the opportunity for the participants to use their imaginations to practice these skills. This chapter presents my evaluation of how the training cultivated comprehension of the skills based on the evidence in their written responses. In the discussion of each session, I begin with a definition of the skill and then highlight the participants' clearest articulations of that skill. I close each discussion with a comment on how effective the text was as a resource for training its respective conflict transformation skill.

5.1 Session 1 • Conscientization • Joseph and the Elder Brothers • Gen 37:12–28; 50:15–21; Ps 133

The conflict transformation skill for session 1 is *conscientization*, which Lederach describes as “awareness-of-self-in-context.”¹ During the training I avoided these technical terms and instead used the phrase *self-awareness during conflict*. In this analysis, I look for evidence that a participant articulates the self-awareness they imagine a biblical person experiencing in the narrative, or any application of the skill of self-awareness to their own conflicts.

¹ Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 112–13.

Participants noticed the intentionality of Joseph's forgiveness and applied that to their own lives. Like the brothers' betrayal, Joseph's forgiveness seems premeditated. Many years passed before he forgives his brothers in-person. As one participant put it, "I must be intentional. Grace is intentional" (14, S1, R4). The participant has awareness that to give grace requires emotional and spiritual preparedness. Another wrote, "You need to step back and try not to let your temper get the best of you" (13, S1, R4). This participant makes a personal application about controlling anger, based on the Joseph narrative. These are expressions of conscientization, because the responses demonstrate an awareness of the role that one's own anger and intentionality play in conflict.

Session 1 provided a useful entry point not only for the conflict transformation skill of conscientization, but also as an emotional entry point into the work of conflict transformation as a whole. Conscientization is a helpful first skill with which to begin a training course, because it does not press a participant too quickly toward resolution of conflict. With this skill the trainer invites each person to take stock of what they carry with them into conflict. The Joseph narrative provides participants with an imaginative space in which to explore a few biblical figures in a familiar narrative. While not every conflict in the Old Testament ends as ideally as the Joseph narrative, Gen 50:15–21 provides participants a clear narrative voice speaking reconciliation in Scripture.

5.2 Session 2 • Active Listening with Applied Paraphrasing • The Shibboleth Kin-Slayings • Judg 12:1–6; Ps 55:12–14

In session 2, the role-play of the miscommunicating tribal elders provided an opportunity to practice the conflict transformation skill of *active listening with applied paraphrasing*.

Lederach ties these two concepts together as one skill. Active listening is the ability to listen with a focus on the other person rather than anticipating one's own response. When it is the listener's

turn to speak, the listener then paraphrases what the other person has just said. This skill confirms that understanding has taken place and makes an emotional connection with the other person.² This is a difficult skill to detect in participants' responses because it requires practice and internalization in order to be most useful.³ However, I look for signs that the participants in session 2 are finding opportunities for better communication or noticing that poor communication was a contributing factor to the violent conflict in Judg 12:1–6.

Nearly all the participants indicated in their second responses that they understood the text better because of the training. In their first responses they were overwhelmed or confused at the narrative, but in the second responses the participants could see that poor communication inflamed the conflict between the two tribes. A few participants were able to articulate more clearly their recognition that active listening and applied paraphrasing would have helped the two tribes in our imaginary role-play of the scenario. As one person puts it, "Each side didn't listen to the other. There were past hurts at play here" (19, S2, R1.2). This participant noticed that the two tribes' differing accounts of their shared history led to violence.⁴ Another drew the application that God desires us to "look inside ourselves and speak softly in an understanding manner to resolve conflict" (7, S2, R3.2). This participant moves from their R3.1, in which they noticed God's hidden activity teaching the tribes, to R3.2 in which the participant has applied God's teaching personally. In R3.2 the person also puts the conflict transformation skill of active listening and applied paraphrasing into their own words, describing a tone and mannerisms

² Lederach, *Reconcile*, 117–22.

³ Lederach, 119.

⁴ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 140–42.

compatible with the skill. This participant expresses in their own words what the skill sounds like in response to God's desire.

Overall, it was difficult to measure the participants' acquisition of this conflict transformation skill with the written prompts. Session 2 responses also indicated an overlap into the conflict transformation skill of conscientization from session 1, even among those participants who were not present for that session. Future attempts to measure whether a training such as mine successfully transmits the skill of active listening with applied paraphrasing may need to introduce more targeted written prompts to elicit more specific feedback.

5.3 Session 3 • Episodic Lens and Epicenter Lens • Ruth and Ezra • Ezra 9:1–10:19; Ruth 1:16–18

I have re-termed Lederach's conflict transformation skill for session 3 as the *problem lens* and *solution lens* for accessibility, based on his terms, "episodic lens" and "epicenter lens."⁵ These two lenses are two different ways to view a conflict. The first is to view the conflict in terms of its symptoms or surface issues: the episodes or problems. The second is to move deeper to notice the systemic contributors to the conflict: the epicenter, looking for solutions at the core of the conflict.

In their second responses, participants demonstrated their understanding of the underlying issues in Ezra 9:1–10:19. One person responded that there was "much more involved in the conflicts than I originally perceived and comprehended" (8, S3, R4). This is the deepening interest in the narrative's nuances that I intended the participants to cultivate. Notice that this person sees plural conflicts in the Ezra passage, not only the conflict about intermarriage. This

⁵ Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 61–67.

same participant described this insight further, “I see many more and different conflicts: The disagreement of the problem—some disagreed; the conflicts between laws; the conflicts during ‘the courts’” (8, S3, R2.2). The participant is picking up on the layers of complexity in the narrative. The participant also notices that in addition to the problem of intermarriage, there are conflicts among the leaders of the remnant themselves (10:15). In other responses participants recognized after the Schlimm dialogue that the epicenter of the conflict in the Ezra passage was not addressed by removing the intermarriages from the remnant. What would stop the remnant from being led astray again? The problem remained in Ezra’s community, a problem that Naomi and Ruth address: How do God’s people appropriately invite outsiders into the community to follow the true God of Israel?

The participants’ responses have shown that the Ezra and Ruth passages helped participants understand that a conflict has both surface-level symptoms as well as long-term factors that defy simplistic solutions. The unsettling nature of Ezra 9:1–10:19 is helpfully balanced by intertextual conversation with Ruth 1:16–18. The imaginative dialogue between Ezra and Ruth written by Schlimm is an extremely helpful teaching aid, superior to an improvised role-play of this text, due to the Ezra text’s challenging content.

5.4 Session 4 • Centered Speaking • David, Nabal, and Abigail • 1 Sam 25:2–42; Ps 25:3

Centered speaking is the capacity to articulate one’s own agency, responsibility, and emotions without assigning blame to another person.⁶ This skill was well-suited for the role-play of session 4, because there are elements in Abigail’s speech to David that resemble the practice of

⁶ Schrock-Shenk, “Centered Communication,” 140–41.

centered speaking, in contrast to Nabal’s speech (1 Sam 25:10–11, 23–31). I looked for responses in which the participants found what made Nabal’s approach to the conflict ineffective and Abigail’s approach highly effective.

Much like the strong empathy toward Ruth in session 3, Abigail won the participants’ hearts for her execution of centered speaking. They gravitated toward her wisdom, saying that she “[took] ownership of the conflict and [tried] to resolve it” (15, S4, R1.2) as compared to David and Nabal, who were “stubborn and seeing only their side” (25, S4, R1.2). Many of the participants gave signs that they understood that the “selfishness and ego” of David and Nabal did not help the conflict (19, S4, R2.2), as compared to the persuasive humility of Abigail.

In the participants’ R4 responses, there were concrete indications that participants experienced a change of mind because of our training in centered speaking. The participants either named centered speaking specifically or expressed features of this skill in their explanation of how their mind was changed:

[Conflict is] more about the attitude. Ask for what you need. (1, S4, R4)

Do everything you can not to put all blame on others—take responsibility too. (15, S4, R4)

Reminder not to use “You” as the center of a conflict. (17, S4, R4)

This pattern of responses shows that this text is useful for training in centered speaking. While we noticed in chapter 4 that 1 Sam 25:2–42 created some theological imaginings that a trainer might not feel are very helpful for the purpose of conflict transformation, such as being preoccupied with God killing Nabal, this text also gives participants a concrete skill that they can immediately begin integrating into their lives.

The skill of centered speaking was highly detectable in the written responses. When a biblical narrative portrays a person successfully navigating conflict, I found clearer evidence in

the written responses that participants understood the respective conflict transformation skill, compared to biblical figures who fail to use a skill, as in Judg 12:1–6. The strong evidence of centered speaking in these responses indicate that Abigail is an effective figure for participants to engage imaginatively in order to build conflict transformation skills. A trainer can use their imagination to frame the role-play of Abigail according to what skill the trainer wants the group to practice. For example, 1 Sam 25:2–42 might also be used to illustrate the skill of conscientization or active listening with applied paraphrasing. By lifting Abigail up as an example, participants in the training see a biblical figure who may be emulated based on the merits of her actual conduct in the passage, unlike David, whom participants tend to view favorably even when he is angry and sinning.

5.5 Session 5 • Encounter • Jacob and Esau • Gen 32:1–33:17; Ps 85:10

Lederach himself draws from Gen 32:1–33:17 to illustrate the skill of “encounter” in his work.⁷ The skill of *encounter* is the way in which one approaches a meeting with one’s opponent vulnerably. Lederach calls this vulnerability before one’s opponent the “mystery of risk.”⁸ Preparing local church leaders for the emotional and spiritual encounter with one’s opponent is an important skill for conflict preparedness because approaching an encounter vulnerably can change the relational posture of the opponent. When the opponent’s posture is changed, the conflict begins to transform.⁹

⁷ Lederach, *Reconcile*, 40–42.

⁸ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 163–64; Lederach, *Reconcile*, 42.

⁹ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 7–10.

The participants grasped that the Jacob-Esau narrative was a climactic encounter of forgiveness and reconciliation. Some of the participants critiqued Jacob for waiting so long before encountering his brother. Their sense was that the conflict persisted in Jacob's imagination far longer than necessary. However, the participants saw this narrative not only as a warning against conflict avoidance, they saw that there are benefits when we encounter an opponent in a timely manner. This shift could be seen in one participant's observation that "Jacob is afraid of Esau" (4, S5, R1.1), but also that "it is better to resolve conflict early" (4, S5, R1.2). Participants affirmed the importance of having a vulnerable encounter with an opponent because without that vulnerability, a conflict will never transform into anything better. The mystery of risk in an encounter is that the conflict may develop fruit when we approach the enemy vulnerably, as Jacob and Esau approached each other. Walking into the storm, trusting God, the storm itself may be transformed.

The Jacob-Esau narrative effectively illustrates the conflict transformation skill of encounter. This effectiveness may have to do with the way the narrative portrays Jacob as finally re-encountering his brother Esau after many years avoiding him. Jacob's avoidance of conflict is unique among all the other biblical figures we have studied in the training. Jacob serves as an imaginative model for the fear, anxiety, and reluctance we each have about engaging a person with whom we share a painful history. Though other sessions were more effective for introducing other elements of conflict preparedness, session 5 has the clearest indicators in the written responses that a conflict transformation skill is being understood and internalized—even more than session 4. I also suspect that framing encounter as a positive conflict transformation skill rather than as the absence of a negative behavior, such as "reducing avoidance," may have contributed to this session's effectiveness. Lederach similarly builds constructive processes that replace destructive processes. Rather than removing negatives, Lederach fills the negative void

with what is good. Jacob and Esau's encounter gives participants one such constructive example with which to imagine how God draws near to those who risk vulnerability with their enemy.

5.6 Conclusion: The Old Testament as a Skills Training Resource

In my analysis of the five conflict transformation skills of the training course, I demonstrated how the Old Testament is not merely an imaginative starting point for conflict transformation. The Old Testament can also lend practical help for skill acquisition. There are many passages of intragroup conflict in the Old Testament that a trainer may effectively employ for training to develop the concrete skills of conflict transformation. The pairings of the five skills with five narratives had to do with the points of contact I saw between each text and each skill. Another trainer with other gifts might choose different pairings. By the participants' written responses, we have evidence that a trainer can effectively work on conflict transformation skills with a group of local church leaders in these texts, though with the caveat I discussed regarding the text of Judg 12:1–6 in session 2. Because conflict in the local church is a storm of language and emotion, the Old Testament itself is an imaginative source for church leaders to practice their conflict transformation skills using theological language. Conflict transformation skills are the grammar of conflict transformation, and the Old Testament prepares leaders to communicate well with each other, ahead of new storms on the horizon.

Conflict transformation skills are constructive when a leader has the wisdom to know when and how to employ those skills. What follows is my analysis of the element of empathic practical wisdom cultivated by our five encounters with the texts of the training.

6. Practical Wisdom: Speaking Empathy into the Storm

6.1 Practical Wisdom and Empathic Choices in the Old Testament's Theological Language

Local church conflict is a storm of language and emotion. For that storm to undergo a transformation, leaders need to speak with empathy toward their opponents in the church even during conflict. I discussed in chapter 5 how my training develops Lederach's conflict transformation skills. His skillset is well-suited for awakening the empathy of participants in his training courses. The capacity to grow in empathy also contributes to "practical wisdom," described robustly by Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe.¹ I adapt Schwartz and Sharpe's practical wisdom to my training by foregrounding their concept's empathic component. To paraphrase, their concept of practical wisdom involves the empathic capacity to work for the good of another person, informed by that other person's own relational and emotional point of view.²

Schwartz and Sharpe argue that the ability to empathize is key to developing practical wisdom. Scriptural texts can contribute to a church leader's practical wisdom by awakening empathy in a specifically theological direction. Powell observes the empathic choices his respondents made as they encountered New Testament texts in his Bible study.³ In my Bible study, participants responded with new empathic choices by encountering texts from the Old Testament. Being less familiar with these Old Testament texts than with New Testament texts, the

¹ Schwartz and Sharpe, *Practical Wisdom*, 3–9.

² Schwartz and Sharpe, 22–23.

³ See Appendix B for further discussion of how Powell's work on empathic choice influences the design of my Bible study.

participants developed new empathic choices as they experienced the relational and emotional points of view of the people in conflict in these narratives. The participants' responses revealed that these new empathic choices cultivated practical wisdom for conflict. With their newfound conflict transformation skills, they learned to speak empathy into the storm.

With increased practical wisdom from their encounters with the Old Testament, local church leaders are better prepared to communicate theologically in local church conflict. They would not be the first to do so. First-century Christians exhibited an extraordinary degree of practical wisdom drawn from the Old Testament when they responded to their own intragroup conflicts with empathy (e.g.: Acts 1:18–22; 2:14–36; 4:11, 23–31; 7:1–53; 13:32–41, 46–48; 15:13–21; 28:23–28). Practical wisdom was already seeded in the Old Testament, patiently waiting to be cultivated by those discerning early Christians who were fluent in that theological language. When conflict arose within those early communities, their leaders were prepared for their conflicts with shared fluency in the theological language of the Old Testament and the wisdom to employ that fluency to transform their conflicts. Pastors and church leaders can still learn to connect our shared theological language with the practical wisdom that our storms of language and emotion demand. We need an atmosphere in which we can practice making those linguistic-emotional connections. My Bible study creates that air space for leaders to train.

In the first half of this chapter, I explain how the non-linearity of empathic choice in the work of Schwartz and Sharpe and the ambiguity of biblical figures in the work of Powell relates to Lederach's approach to conflict transformation. I explore in the second half of this chapter how empathic practical wisdom manifests in participants' responses to the Old Testament texts from each training session.

6.1.1 Practical Wisdom for the Local Church

Lederach is no longer a single voice crying in the wilderness. Scholars and practitioners in the field of conflict studies are increasingly publishing works that align with Lederach's idea that the emotional and relational processes of conflict require a proportionate emotional and relational response. Relational responses are non-linear and not easily condensed into a one-size-fits-all program. Every conflict requires a custom-designed transformation process.⁴ Likewise, Schwartz and Sharpe argue that the underdeveloped human capacity for practical wisdom has the power to transform obstacles that resist prescriptive, linear designs. In large organizations, top-level leaders often respond to a conflict by developing linear solutions that reduce risk while sacrificing human creativity, contributing to burnout, and stifling productivity.⁵ Top-down solutions are like forcing a talented chef to cook a meal with someone else's inferior recipe.⁶ The recipe is not as important as the chef's capacities to make her own informed culinary choices. So too in organizational leadership, Schwartz and Sharpe urge leaders to reclaim the empathic instincts that foster practical wisdom.⁷ Practical wisdom makes good leaders who can build stronger teams.

Schwartz and Sharpe connect the development of empathic instincts to Aristotle's slow cultivation of the virtues. The common thread between Schwartz and Sharpe's practical wisdom, Strawn's Old Testament fluency, and Lederach's imaginative conflict transformation is that these capacities, like Aristotle's virtues, require the slow work of a leader patiently developing their

⁴ Lederach, *Building Peace*, 107.

⁵ Schwartz and Sharpe, *Practical Wisdom*, 15–26, 166, 175, 180.

⁶ Schwartz and Sharpe, 159.

⁷ Schwartz and Sharpe, 69.

role in a community in such a way that their empathy turns effectively toward a practical purpose.⁸ Schwartz and Sharpe give an extended example of a math teacher who spends lots of time with her students, developing her empathic intuition to understand why her students make math mistakes.⁹ The teacher gains practical wisdom to teach effectively by repeatedly imagining math problems from her students' perspectives. With this imaginative-empathic capacity my Bible study invites participants to reimagine themselves with the Old Testament's theological language by entering into the Old Testament's relational and emotional dynamics. We have to imagine ourselves in conflict so that we can imagine how conflict may be transformed.

A final point of contact I want to make with Schwartz and Sharpe's practical wisdom is that the imaginative-empathic capacity necessary for practical wisdom is similar to the capacity by which a pastor imaginatively bridges the "gap" between their own theological language and the theological language of the local church.¹⁰ As with Lederach's work on cross-cultural conflict transformation, pastors in the North American context typically do not serve the local church in which their original spiritual formation occurred. A pastor may also undergo years of theological formation in a seminary with a culture all its own. It is appropriate therefore to think of the pastor as a type of theological migrant, who must imaginatively adapt to new surroundings and say, as Ruth says to Naomi, "Your people will be my people" (Ruth 1:16ba). Empathy helps the pastor cross the theological language divide to communicate better with their church.

⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

⁹ Schwartz and Sharpe, *Practical Wisdom*, 164.

¹⁰ Powell, *What Do They Hear?*, 22.

To incorporate practical wisdom into our conflict transformation process, the pastor-as-trainer develops leaders by “practicing alongside” them.¹¹ The trainer in Lederach’s approach takes an accompanying role that Schwartz and Sharpe liken to a coach. The role is more relational than technical. Pastors who do the work of conflict transformation must think cross-culturally about their church, its scriptural fluency, and its theological imagination. To do so involves the technical skill of a pastor-theologian, but the skills are in service to the relationality of the role. The empathic theological imagination is the pastor’s own practical wisdom. Pastors must imaginatively empathize how their leaders feel and process their theology during conflict in order to develop those leaders’ theological imaginations.

6.1.2 Powell’s Empathic Choices: Encountering the Old Testament During the Training

Because Powell’s method of Bible study reveals divergent empathic choices by clergy and laity in response to New Testament texts, one might wonder whether those empathic choices had already been set long ago, given that both laity and clergy tend to encounter Gospel texts more frequently than Old Testament texts. Prior empathy might interfere with a conflict training that aims to develop new empathy if the texts are too familiar. Therefore, my Bible study’s less familiar Old Testament texts elicit new empathic choices.

Unlike Powell’s study, all the texts in my training feature intragroup conflict. He studied empathic choices the participants made toward Jesus and other figures in familiar Gospel texts. By contrast, the Old Testament texts I selected are far less familiar to my participants. The empathic choices involve more ambiguity. In Powell’s texts, Jesus and the disciples represent

¹¹ Schwartz and Sharpe, *Practical Wisdom*, 44–46.

straightforward moral choices. The figures in the Old Testament texts I have selected are not all admirable, nor are all of the biblical persons even familiar. Whereas Powell's study reveals preexisting empathic choices, my training develops new empathic choices that contribute to practical wisdom.

For some Christians this ambiguity in the biblical figures may be unsettling. However, ambiguity in the Old Testament is not to be feared. The ambiguity of the people in these narratives is not a blemish on the inspiration and authority of Scripture. Rather, the moral ambiguity of these texts' figures is a narrative feature that draws the reader's empathy into the theological language of Scripture. Each narrative presents a conflict that is also a crisis point requiring a faithful response. The conflict is an invitation to faithfulness. Therefore, the ambiguity of these Old Testament figures is not a detriment to Scripture or a deterrent to the imaginative fluency of a Christian leader.

This feature of ambiguous characterization in Scripture also allows us to imagine ourselves empathically in a figure's place. The people in these texts are fully humanized in our imaginations as readers. We empathize with them because we ourselves can see correspondence between their ambiguity and our own lack of clarity as human beings who do not fully know God's will.¹² Through our newfound empathy with the imperfect human beings in a text, Scripture itself develops our emotional life. It is in the development of these new empathic choices that the theological imagination opens up toward practical wisdom.

¹² Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 137–38; Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying*, 241–42. Lederach and Strawn share in common a belief that the past can point us toward transformation.

6.2 Practical Wisdom Discovered in the Training

The participants' new empathic choices may be grouped as expressions of favor toward one biblical personage or another. The participants expressed empathy by acknowledging that they understood a biblical figure's point of view or imaginatively inhabited that person's emotional life. These empathic choices are signs that the participants were developing practical wisdom.

6.2.1 Practical Wisdom in Session 1 • Joseph and the Elder Brothers • Gen 37:12–28; 50:15–21; Ps 133

I expected the participants to show a heavy empathic choice in favor of Joseph against the elder brothers due to the brothers' mistreatment of Joseph and the narrative's positive portrayal of him. Powell would tag this as my pastoral instinct toward "idealistic empathy." However, participants felt what Powell calls "realistic empathy" toward the elder brothers in their jealousy of Jacob's favoritism toward Joseph.¹³ One person articulated a transformation of their empathy toward the elder brothers as they read and re-read the narrative:

Jealousy creates anger amongst brothers to the point where they wanted to kill a brother. (11, S1, R1.1)

The brothers' jealousy then turns into fear at what would happen to them at the hands of their brother. (R1.2)

The participant noticed the jealousy of 37:12–28 in their first reading, but in the second reading the participant empathized more with the brothers' fear in 50:15–21. We can empathize not only with the elder brothers' jealousy but also with their fear of Joseph's power in Egypt.

Participants understood the hard feelings that the elder brothers hold toward Joseph, while still identifying with the mercy and magnanimity that Joseph displays when he forgives his

¹³ Powell, *What Do They Hear?*, 57.

brothers. The famine's necessity pressured the brothers to persist in a relationship with magnanimous Joseph whom they had betrayed. Recognizing this pressure, the participants also empathized with the elder brothers in their humbled estate, brought on by famine. It takes practical wisdom to bring out these emotional nuances from the narrative. Perhaps practical wisdom also made our group more attentive readers of Scripture.

Others empathized with Joseph due to the continuing duplicity of the elder brothers, as one person puts it:

Joseph's brothers still appear to be scheming to get what they want. They haven't really changed. (25, S1, R1.1)

The brothers don't really seem to be sorry. They just need grain. (R1.2)

This is also a perceptive reading in which the participant expresses Powell's concept of realistic empathy toward the brothers' hidden emotions suggested by Gen 50:15–17. Even when a participant does not experience Powell's concept of idealistic empathy, there is realistic wisdom that develops from encountering duplicitous figures in the narrative.

The empathic choice to inhabit the emotional space of Joseph's forgiveness supports Strawn's argument that Joseph not only preaches forgiveness but lives it.¹⁴ However, the remaining participants in our group did not view Joseph with unconditional admiration. Responses indicate that Joseph first had to grow in "self-awareness" (1, S1, R2.1) out of his youthful arrogance into the grace-filled person who forgives his betrayers. Our participants were wise readers, noticing that Joseph himself had to grow in wisdom before he could forgive his brothers like God forgives. As a sign of this theological direction of participants' practical wisdom, many participants showed empathy in R3 to both Joseph and the elder brothers,

¹⁴ Strawn, "The Slow Burn of Forgiveness," 31–40.

indicating that God was the one guiding them all to reconcile. Theologically speaking, empathy was not as scarce as famine grain in this text. Joseph's empathy for his brothers also evokes empathy from us as readers toward his brothers as well.

6.2.2 Practical Wisdom in Session 2 • The Shibboleth Kin-Slayings • Judg 12:1–6; Ps 55:12–14

Unlike any of the other five sessions, in session 2 the conflict of Judg 12:1–6 provoked little admiration for the people in the text, yet the text still produced practical wisdom. The design of this session gave participants a difficult narrative in which there was no clear party with whom to empathize, unlike the Joseph narrative. However, the participants exhibited practical wisdom by pointing out that arrogance and a lack of trust drove the violence in the narrative. Seeing the way in which this text's conflict devolves into total devastation, four people in R4 made the personal application that they themselves need to give empathy to a person with whom they are in conflict.

While some participants remained in the tension of the narrative's empathic difficulty, others chose to favor the Gileadites as the victor. It is a curious outcome that no participants reported empathy with the Ephraimites, who are the worst off at the end of the narrative (12:6). This passage presents us with an important test of my Bible study's limitations. If the trainer wants to encourage participants to empathize with multiple parties in a conflict, the trainer should encourage the participants during conversation and role-play to consider the grievances of each party in a balanced way. Even though neither tribe evoked admiration from participants, the narrative tells a cautionary tale of practical wisdom that the participants' responses indicate they understood.

6.2.3 Practical Wisdom in Session 3 • Ruth and Ezra • Ezra 9:1–10:19; Ruth 1:16–18

The tension between the narratives of Ezra and Ruth in session 3 served to make this session the most important for stretching the participants' ability to make empathic choices. As we saw in session 2, participants had a tendency to extend empathy to anyone who seems to be favored by God as a victor in an Old Testament narrative, such as the Gileadites who won the battle against Ephraim. Some narratives set up this expectation only to undermine it, as happens in the Jacob-Esau narrative. But in this session about Ruth and Ezra, Schlimm's dialogue scripted some opportunities for empathic choice. Since the intertextual conversation between Ruth and Ezra is subtle, his dialogue served as an empathic guide for the training participants.

Before we enacted Schlimm's dialogue, in our first reading of Ezra 9:1–10:19 the participants showed strong empathy toward Ezra and his officials, noting that they were trying to save the remnant community and "get back on track" (15, S3, R3.1). There was also empathy with the sense of embarrassment and shame that members of the remnant community would have felt by being singled out because of their intermarriages. After the Schlimm dialogue and the second reading of the Ezra passage, the participants empathized with the women and children, but also continued to empathize with the remnant community as a whole because of the intermarriage quandary.

I had to make an extra effort to teach about the pressure Ezra's remnant community was under. I made this decision on the fly, because I noticed that once participants read the Schlimm dialogue aloud, the mood of our group turned decisively in favor of Ruth and the women and children of the Ezra passage—strongly against Ezra. This turn may be surprising for some who think of evangelical communities such as mine as inherently stern or strict, as if such a community would always favor Ezra's position. However, I think the empathic choice for Ruth is

enhanced by the group's prior knowledge that Ruth is in the ancestral line of David and therefore also the line of Jesus. In future trainings, a trainer needs to weigh carefully the mood of the group in order to help participants give empathic attention to more than one biblical figure.

6.2.4 Practical Wisdom in Session 4 • David, Nabal, and Abigail • 1 Sam 25:2–42; Ps 25:3

The session 4 material provided many opportunities for participants to exercise empathic choice. While I predicted correctly that Abigail would receive most of the empathy in the written responses, it is also important to note that a small amount of empathy was even given to Nabal, at least in part because of the way in which we explored the demands that the guest-host covenant places on the hosting household. Participants saw Abigail as possessing robust practical wisdom to protect her household when Nabal in his foolishness exposes the household to danger. One person astutely observes, “maybe Abigail was trying to save her children” (15, S4, R2.2). This is a very specific empathic choice, not only to take sides with Abigail but to understand what her motivations as a mother might be.

It is also important that David did not receive universal empathy from the readers, due to his murderous anger in the narrative. Wisely recognizing the flaws in his character, the participants' shift in empathy toward Abigail entailed that David did not receive unconditional approval. We learned that not all biblical protagonists are as trustworthy as Abigail. In this empathic shift toward Abigail participants developed a fuller sense of the Old Testament's theological presentation of David. Empathic choice fostered this practical wisdom in tandem with growing fluency. The elements of fluency and wisdom converged.

The narrative's dynamics of a household put at risk by a starving David produced a few other faint empathic chords. One participant empathized with the desperation of David and his men in their hunger. David's famished desperation is a key to empathizing with him in spite of

his murderous rag. A trainer could develop further the motif of David's desperation in the role-play. There was further empathy extended to David because of the way Nabal insulted David (1 Sam 25:1–12). Likewise, Nabal's household also received empathy as the innocent targets of David's rage, despite antipathy toward Nabal himself (25:17). These are all signs of practical wisdom developing from participant's imaginative engagement with the passage.

This text was fruitful because it provided several different directions for empathic choice to run. The guest-host covenant creates a situation of social pressure that impinges on many people in a household, not just David and Nabal. In this way, the conflict of this passage bears some resemblance to Judg 12:1–6, in which we role-played tribal leaders in a conflict that had implications for everyone attempting to cross the river. 1 Sam 25:2–42 also bears resemblance to the Ezra-Ruth dialogue by Schlimm, because of Abigail's strong advocacy for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Just as Ruth advocated with Ezra in the imaginative dialogue for a compassionate response to the women and children of the intermarriages, Abigail advocates with David not to hold Nabal's offense against the rest of Nabal's household. This text is useful when the trainer wants to bring out the effects that destructive conflict has on adjacent stakeholders who are caught in a storm not of their own making. By keeping the Ezra-Ruth dialogue and Abigail's peacemaking close together in the sequence of training sessions, a trainer may highlight the ways in which women in the Bible teach practical wisdom. Abigail and Ruth stand apart in my Bible study for the high amount of empathy they received.

6.2.5 Practical Wisdom in Session 5 • Jacob and Esau • Gen 32:1– 33:17; Ps 85:10

Participants showed a balanced empathy between Jacob and Esau. The participants were also imaginatively empathic about Esau's inner emotional life, since the narrative does not reveal anything about Esau's emotions in the intervening years between his loss of the blessing and his

reunion with Jacob. Some empathized with the long-held anger Esau must have released during those years. Others empathized with Jacob's fear about his looming encounter with Esau, which he had avoided for decades. Frequently the participants empathized with Jacob's fear that Esau would seek revenge even after so many years had passed. The long-term nature of the brothers' estrangement received many comments. The participants also had a great deal of empathy for both Jacob and Esau in that they not only faced each other, but also faced the mixture of feelings they each held onto for many years. The length of narrative time between Jacob's theft of the blessing and the brothers' reunion allows the participants to explore empathically the cycles of emotion involved in long-term conflict.

God's hidden role in the brothers' reconciliation also played a part in the participants' empathic choices. One person wrote that God "soften[ed Jacob and Esau's] hearts to each other" (17, S5, R3.2). Even before the role-play and conversation, participants acknowledged God as the chief agent of Jacob and Esau's reconciliation. As in other sessions, when the participants articulated God's hidden involvement in the narrative, they were also able to articulate a practical application of the narrative to themselves. Consider this set of highly articulate responses that have the ring of practical wisdom:

We are supposed to work with each other to heal. (13, S5, R4)

There will always be conflict. Put some work into it. It can be resolved, or just agree to disagree and move on. (15, S5, R4)

Sometimes conflict can be avoided if you understand the other person's personality is different than yours. What may not offend one person greatly offends others. (17, S5, R4)

It's better to address your conflicts than to avoid them. (25, S5, R4)

Never carry ill will. It will hurt your own happiness. (29, S5, R4)

These responses were significant fruit at the training's culmination. Notice especially the nuanced empathy that Participant 17 extends to others, recognizing that personality differences

affect our conflicts. This person is gaining practical wisdom that there are innate differences between people. Recognizing these differences, we can avoid destructive conflict. This is an empathic insight that will generate even more empathy in the future. Notice also how each of these five responses has a summative tone. Narrating and role-playing Jacob and Esau's reconciliation in the final session helped participants synthesize their total experience of the training. The theological significance of the brothers' reconciliation is amplified by the training course's design. After studying the destructive conflict cycles of the texts in sessions 2–4, the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau provides the participants with a breath of fresh air that echoes the reconciliation of Jacob's children in session 1.

6.3 Conclusion: Empathy, Conflict Transformation Skills, and the Resonance of Practical Wisdom

The study participants' empathic choices resonated beyond the bounds of the narrative to the people in their own lives. These empathic choices are adjacent to the conflict transformation skills I analyzed in chapter 5. The analytical difference between the conflict transformation skills and empathy is that conflict transformation skills are accessed cognitively, whereas empathic choices are an emotional element of conflict preparedness. Yet these two elements are not opposed. The cognitive skills and the empathic choices resonate together within the group of participants as they train.¹⁵ Like a storm cycle, the resonance between the two elements is cyclical. That resonance between empathy and skill may be called practical wisdom. Local church conflict is a storm of language and emotion. The empathic choices developed in this training are an entry into the applied wisdom leaders need for the future storms they encounter.

¹⁵ Lederach and Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*, 100–102.

Empathy is a complex emotional experience with lower and higher degrees of magnitude. In the next chapter I wrap up my analysis of the participants' written responses with a look at what happens when a person exhibits a sufficiently high degree of empathy. With enough empathy, a participant can complete an imaginative cycle and reimagine their opponent as a full human being. To this incredible fourth element, rehumanization, we now turn.

7. Rehumanizing the Enemy: Reimagining Opponents Caught in the Storm with Us

In the first half of this chapter, I examine how a participant's strong empathy toward a biblical figure may converge with their growing imaginative fluency in the Old Testament's theological language in order to create an exceptionally fruitful element of conflict preparedness: the rehumanization of an enemy. In the chapter's second half, I analyze how some participants expressed this element in their written responses.

7.1 Rehumanizing the Enemy in the Theological Imagination

In adapting Powell's method for evoking empathic choice from Scripture, my Bible study further develops the potential for strong empathic choices by featuring Old Testament texts whose human figures are not easily stereotyped as good or evil.¹ I anticipated that participants in the training would be stretched by new empathic choices prompted by our group readings and role-play exercises. But over the course of a session, some participants created so much new empathy that they changed their view of a biblical person entirely. They reimagined biblical enemies as valuable human beings. Their process of dehumanizing an enemy in the text was interrupted and sometimes even reversed. I use the term *rehumanization* to discuss this reversal of the dehumanization process.²

¹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 153–54.

² Lederach and Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*, 143, 159, 166, 168.

In conflict, alliances are drawn up, and people sort each other as friends or foes.³ Framing someone as an enemy is so native to human beings that we do this without even thinking.⁴ Typecasting an enemy as inherently wicked, corrupt, or sinful is part of the process by which a person is dehumanized, to the point that the dehumanized enemy becomes undeserving of empathy. It is this inward loss of empathy for the dehumanized enemy that permits a person to feel justified in harming their enemy.⁵ The process of dehumanizing enemies is one reason why human beings are capable of rationalizing heinous acts of violence. But even in a setting such as the local church in which physical violence is usually not on the table, when we conceive of someone else in the church as an enemy, we then feel justified in harming that person with gossip, shame, blame, and other tactics common in intragroup conflict.

These tactics can be subtle. The harm is not visible unless a conflict reaches a high level of intensity.⁶ We can dress up our tactics for church, as prayer requests, righteous indignation, pastoral concern, or a sense of duty to protect the church. We fool ourselves into ignoring the harm our tactics cause. It is this harmful process of dehumanization in the local church that conflict preparedness is intended to interrupt and reverse. Rehumanizing the enemy is a means of harm reduction.

³ Edward G. Dobson, Speed B. Leas, and Marshall Shelley, *Mastering Conflict and Controversy* (Portland: Multnomah, 1992), 160; Bullard, *Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict*, 83–108; and Lyon and Moseley, *How to Lead in Church Conflict*, 52.

⁴ Amanda Ripley, *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2021), 51–52, Kindle.

⁵ Ripley, 130; Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019), 175–79, 269, Kindle.

⁶ Bullard, Jr., *Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict*, 17, 39.

To reverse the process of dehumanization requires imagination. In reading the Old Testament, we encounter opportunities to reimagine our enemies theologically as people not inimical to our story, but perhaps also vital to our story.⁷ We encounter figures in the Old Testament whom we may, by the narrative's own cues, be first inclined to frame as an enemy.⁸ Some participants in my training conceived of the following figures in the texts as enemies: the brothers of Joseph (Gen 37:12–28), Ephraim, who lost the dispute with Gilead. (Judg 12:4–6), the women and children of the intermarriages (Ezra 9:1–2), Nabal (1 Sam 25:10–11), and Esau (Gen 32:6). However, some participants also rehumanized those figures. Since conflict in the local church is a storm of language and emotion, the Old Testament's theological language can halt the emotional process of dehumanizing an enemy. Giving attention to the details in a narrative, a participant in a conflict transformation training such as this Bible study can have preliminary experience in rehumanizing their own enemies as well.

This process of rehumanization is facilitated by three of the narratives as each moves to its conclusion: (1) Joseph's brothers are humbled and forgiven (Gen 50:19–21), (2) the household of foolish Nabal arises with Abigail and follows her lead as a peacemaker instead of Nabal (1 Sam 25:18–42), and (3) Esau surprises Jacob with gestures of reconciliation (Gen 33:4–16). The other two narratives are more difficult, but rehumanization may occur upon repeated reading as a participant reflects on the dynamics of the conflicts in which the figures are enmeshed. The Ephraimites may be rehumanized as aggrieved allies of Gilead, with whom friendship is strained due to poor communication (Judg 12:1–3). In the case of the women and children in Ezra 9:1–

⁷ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 140, 145–49.

⁸ Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2015), 115–16. Imagining enemies in the Old Testament is itself an ancient practice.

10:19, the intertextual conversation with Ruth 1:16–18 influenced some participants to rehumanize the women and children. Those participants saw how the disenfranchised women were tragically not given the chance to respond with faithfulness to the God of Israel as Ruth did. Repeated reading and intertextual conversations invite us to reconsider our first impressions. These practices of imaginative fluency in the Old Testament’s theological language help participants reconsider the human value of our enemies.

7.2 Rehumanization of the Enemy in the Training

The other three elements of conflict preparedness can be detected and analyzed both in participants’ first sets of responses and in their second sets of responses as well. However, rehumanization is an element that tends not to appear until after the participants have role-played, conversed, and encountered their biblical enemy the second time in the scriptural narrative. The role-playing exercises provide an imaginative opportunity for the participants to extend empathic choice to an enemy figure. When the rehumanization process is successful, those new empathic choices from the role-play flower into a new perspective on the enemy when a participant hears the text read a second time. Therefore, rehumanization appears primarily in the second set of responses, which I present here.

7.2.1 Rehumanizing the Enemy in Session 1 • Joseph and the Elder Brothers • Gen 37:12–28; 50:15–21; Ps 133

In the first reading of Gen 50:15–21, participants emphasized the jealousy the elder brothers felt, without any empathic comment. The brothers personified jealousy and were less than human. But in the second set, participants began to appreciate the pain of the elder brothers at their father’s favoritism for Joseph. They saw the pain that contributed to the brothers’ jealousy. As one person wrote, “I think the brothers were upset with their father for showing preference to Joseph” (4, S1, R2.2). This rehumanization of the brothers did not result in the

participants excusing the betrayal of Joseph. Rather, this tense knowledge that the brothers were both hurt and standing in need of forgiveness rehumanized them. Joseph himself trained our group to rehumanize the enemy, as evidenced by responses like this, “If Joseph can forgive his brothers who treated him so badly, I should be able to forgive small things done to me” (11, S1, R4). Participants rehumanized their opponents like Joseph rehumanized his brothers.

The grace-filled example of Joseph makes this text an excellent selection for an early session in the training. Featuring the Joseph text early in the training course introduces the element of rehumanization to participants from the start. Forgiveness orients the participants in this session, setting up the training course’s trajectory that culminates in the rehumanization of Esau. In subsequent iterations of this training, I will spend more time in conversation around the rehumanization of Joseph’s brothers, so that participants will have this text as a compass by which to navigate the more challenging texts of Judg 12:1–6 and Ezra 9:1–10:19.

7.2.2 Rehumanizing the Enemy in Session 2 • The Shibboleth Kin-Slayings • Judg 12:1–6; Ps 55:12–14

Rehumanization was difficult to detect in this passage. This is another challenge a trainer may encounter when presenting Judg 12:1–6, because to modern readers the two tribes are fighting over seemingly petty matters. It is hard for participants to rehumanize the figures in the passage when there is not a clear protagonist or antagonist. The trainer should take this into account by exploring with the group why it is difficult to relate to these figures.

However, the participants do shift from looking down on the tribes as petty and backwards to notice instead the common human feelings we share with the tribes: the need for acknowledgement, the feeling of being excluded, and the struggle to communicate while angry. One person expressed rehumanization of the tribes by recognizing their human need to be acknowledged for their contribution to past battles. Another participant noticed the flaw of

jealousy in the tribes at first, and then also noticed the tribes' vulnerability due to lack of leadership. Still another participant initially saw the Ephraimites as expendable, as if God were intentionally eliminating them through the tragedy of the Shibboleth slayings. That same participant then moved in their second response to acknowledge that the tragedy was not blood on God's hands, but due rather to the problem of poor communication between the tribes. Despite the difficulties encountered in this passage, one participant found the personal application to rehumanize their own opponents, "Yes, [we] must put ourselves in each other's shoes—look at the other side" (13, S2, R4).

Even though rehumanization was a struggle in session 2, that does not mean this session was a failure. Lederach's cyclical model of conflict transformation involves steps backward and downward.⁹ The challenge to grasp the humanity of the tribes in the text can be explored in the role-play and the conversation afterward. Knowing more now about how this challenging text cultivates rehumanization differently than the other texts, in future training I will further explore the humanity of the tribes during the session's time for conversation.

7.2.3 Rehumanizing the Enemy in Session 3 • Ruth and Ezra • Ezra 9:1–10:19; Ruth 1:16–18

Because of the stern tone of Ezra 9:1–10:19, the move to dehumanize the women and children of the intermarriages is the strongest example of dehumanization out of all the texts in the training. This feature in the text has the potential to make this session the most dramatic for a participant's experience of rehumanizing an enemy. The comparison between this person's first and second responses illustrates how drastic the strength of the rehumanizing process can be:

Sinners had to pay with consequences. (10, S3, R1.1)

⁹ Lederach, *Building Peace*, 136–38.

God trying to teach people that everything isn't always black and white. We have to show grace. (R1.2)

Two other participants also expressed words similar to these. However, a challenge may arise in that even after the dialogue, some participants still might not rehumanize the women and children. We cannot assume that each person in the training reads the text the same. As with so many processes of conflict transformation, there is no guaranteed outcome. If a mixture of different outcomes is unacceptable to the trainer, then the trainer should consider seriously whether to include this text in training, because the experience is more highly charged than the material in other sessions.

The prompts Q3.2 and Q4 in session 3 guided the participants to articulate rehumanization. After reading Schlimm's dialogue aloud, participants saw God's hidden activity. They wrote that God was rehumanizing the women and children in the eyes of Ezra and his officials, even though the text gives no indication that this happens. Our group described its own process of rehumanizing the women and children by inferring that rehumanization also happened in the narrative. As our group of participants rehumanized the women and children, they imaginatively read their change of perspective onto the hidden activity of God in the text. Notice these indicators that participants had silently rehumanized the women and children as each participant developed their empathy from R3.1 to R3.2 in these examples:

Example 1:

Trying to teach people they have consequences for their actions, and also how to resolve their disputes. (10, S3, R3.1)

Trying to teach people to show grace. (R3.2)

Example 2:

Showing sinners that sin does not come without punishment. (14, S3, R3.1)

God is urging us to be disciples and not to be elitist. (R3.2)

Example 3:
Surrender, get back on track. (15, S3, R3.1)

Show grace. (R3.2)

One participant renders their own decision on Ezra's leadership thus, "Ezra and the elders could have found a more equitable way to solve the problem" (25, S3, R4).

The participants' R3.1 responses emphasize "consequences," "punishment," and "get[ing] back on track," but then in R3.2 and R4 they articulate "grace," "not be[ing] elitist," and "a more equitable way." These are the most dramatic shifts of any session's responses. We see implied in the R3.1 that the women and children were the problem and were expendable in service to a resolution. After the Schlimm dialogue and our conversation, the women and children are seen as human beings deserving of compassion.

One challenge for the trainer in this session may be that as participants rehumanize the women and children, Ezra may be dehumanized instead. Is it possible to hold in tension the humanity of all the figures in this passage? This may be difficult because of the connection Ruth has as an ancestor to Jesus, which makes her appeal to compassion persuasive in the dialogue. Although I did not witness supersessionism and antisemitism in this session, there is a risk those attitudes might arise if a participant dehumanizes Ezra and the remnant. This would be a pitfall especially if the trainer pushed the group too hard to take sides in the Ezra-Ruth dialectic rather than remaining in the tension modeled by Schlimm's dialogue.

Despite the challenges, the Ezra and Ruth passages are helpful for training participants in the process of rehumanizing an enemy. Participants who rehumanized the women and children in Ezra 9:1–10:19 not only made a strong empathic choice, like Ruth in Schlimm's dialogue, some even became advocates for the women and children.

7.2.4 Rehumanizing the Enemy in Session 4 • David, Nabal, and Abigail • 1 Sam 25:2–42; Ps 25:3

Despite the intertextual conversation of 1 Sam 25:2–42 with Ps 23:5, in which God’s table is prepared in the presence of enemies, these texts did not prompt participants toward a strong process of rehumanizing the biblical figures. Abigail is a figure who resists dehumanization. Likewise, David is a familiar protagonist with rich characterization both in the text of 1 Sam and in the Christian imagination. By comparison, Nabal’s characterization is flat, with few redeeming qualities. Dehumanizing Nabal is quite easy, while rehumanizing him is nearly impossible within the bounds of the narrative. Despite Nabal’s portrayal in the text, our conversation about the guest-host covenant did cause two participants to rehumanize Nabal. The guest-host dynamic was emphasized in our role-play and in conversation. Future training with this text might draw out the guest-host dynamic even more in order to give Nabal a fighting chance at rehumanization in the eyes of the participants. Without understanding that David was asking for a lot from Nabal in terms of the guest-host covenant, there would not have been any sympathy for Nabal at all.

However, a few participants also rehumanized Abigail as a figure who is won over to David’s side from the side of the enemy Nabal. One person wrote about God “softening Abigail’s heart” to feed David (17, S4, R3.2). The poetic text of Ps 23:5 prompted another participant to see Abigail as an enemy who fulfilled that verse. The same participant said that David’s army eating with Abigail and the rest of Nabal’s household was an act of “eating with the enemy and becoming friends” (1, S4, R1.2).

In Lederach’s concept of reconciliation, Abigail is uniquely positioned within the middle of a leadership structure and therefore able to influence grassroots followers to reconcile in a way

that top leaders avoid.¹⁰ Because of her middle position and her actions as a reconciler, Abigail resists dehumanization. Her actions influence not only David and those around her, but the attitudes and empathies of the readers as well. We see Nabal's whole household in a better light because of Abigail's quick thinking. Abigail helps readers rehumanize the household of Nabal, who would have been seen as expendable beneath David's sword.

It may be that 1 Sam 25:2–42 is not the most suitable for training in rehumanization, even though it is suitable for training in centered speaking and for the example of Abigail's leadership. A trainer can explore instead Abigail's role as a mid-level leader, how she uses that position to bring about change, and how she positively influences our perception of the rest of Nabal's household.

7.2.5 Rehumanizing the Enemy in Session 5 • Jacob and Esau • Gen 32:1–33:17; Ps 85:10

There was not as much dehumanization of Esau in the participants' first responses as might have been expected, which meant that rehumanization was harder to detect as well. This may be because we did not read aloud Gen 27:41–45 to appreciate Esau's intent to kill Jacob after his theft of Esau's blessing. Even though I summarized the theft of the blessing in the training and explained the dynamic that ensued, that explanation might not have been enough for the participants to dehumanize Esau. The trainer might spend more time in conversation helping participants relate to the dehumanization and rehumanization of Esau that Jacob himself experiences in the narrative.

¹⁰ Lederach, *Building Peace*, 32–49.

One curious response arose from holding the Jacob-Esau narrative in conversation with Ps 85:10. A participant commented that these texts involved “good and evil reuniting in a peaceful manner” (7, S5, R1.1). This person’s other responses from session 5 show symbolic reasoning that seems to be inspired by Ps 85:10, in which righteousness and peace kiss. The participant saw Jacob and Esau representing good and evil reconciling. Apparently, this person dehumanized Esau to the point that the person saw Esau personifying evil itself. If my reading is correct, then this is a strong instance of rehumanization that stands out from the rest of the participants’ responses in this session. It seems by this response that this participant saw Esau as evil transformed and rehumanized into a peaceful person again.

Jacob’s moral transformation was also the subject of a few participants’ responses. The participants understood that Jacob moves from apprehension about meeting Esau to discover that Esau has become a loving brother once again. Participants also echoed the narrative’s surprise rehumanization of Esau that Jacob himself experiences. They articulated from Jacob’s point of view. Another response uniquely rehumanized Jacob rather than Esau. North American readers often disapprove of Jacob’s trickster behavior on moral grounds, even if he is entertaining. Since Jacob’s thievery was what enraged Esau in the first place, it makes sense that some would view Jacob as an antagonist in the text.

Regardless of whether a participant rehumanized Jacob or Esau, most striking were the many instances of R3 in which the participants began rehumanizing not only the biblical figures but also people in their own personal orbit. Not all participants had to rehumanize Jacob and Esau in order to benefit from this text. Most were still able to apply the text imaginatively to rehumanize the opponents in their own lives. As weather can be unpredictable, the process of rehumanization can emerge in unpredictable but powerful ways when we engage the Jacob-Esau text.

7.3 Conclusion: Rehumanizing Enemies as Companions for the Storm

Most Christians would assent that loving enemies is a good thing, because Jesus commands us to (Matt 5:43–45). How do we turn our aspiration to obey Jesus’s commandment into a lived reality? We begin to obey by rehumanizing the enemy. The Old Testament itself coaxes us to value the humanity in our enemies. Lederach experiences this process of rehumanizing an enemy in his encounter with a soldier whom he dehumanizes during a violent conflict. He later sees the soldier caring for a young girl. By sharing empathy with the soldier for the girl, Lederach reconnects with the humanity he shares with the soldier.¹¹ We experience a similar rehumanization in Old Testament texts that point us toward the humanity we share with the biblical figures caught in the storm cycles of the narratives.

By reflecting on both sides of the conflict in a text, participants inhabited the humanity of the biblical figures whom they first conceptualized as the enemies of a narrative’s protagonist. As the participants role-played and reflected on Scripture, they unwound the process by which they imagined an enemy. Local church conflict is a storm of language and emotion, but our opponents in the church are not the storm itself. Enemies are caught in the storm of conflict with us. Rehumanized enemies can become companions for future storm cycles of conflict.

This concludes my analysis of the participants’ written evidence of their development. In the final chapter of my thesis, I interpret theologically the creative practices of the training that contributed to the constructive outcomes.

¹¹ Lederach, *The Journey Toward Reconciliation*. 43–50.

8. Peaceful Preparations: Nourishing the Fruits and Roots of Local Church Leadership

8.1 Preparatory Fruit for the Rain of Conflict

Chapter 1 began with the metaphor of the storm for conflict. Throughout this thesis, I framed my Bible study's outcomes as a form of preparation for future cycles of stormy weather in the local church. A storm is a rich metaphor because it is visual, physical, and sonic.¹ Perhaps this multivalence is why storm language is used so often to describe conflict.² To extend that metaphor just a bit further, I want to appreciate that there are helpful products that come from a storm. The rain of the storm provides water, with which life grows. A storm also scrubs the sky clean of particulates, so that we can enjoy vivid sunsets and a clear view of the stars. Because the storm cleanses, weather-worn survivors are greeted by unparalleled calm on the following day.

Constructive conflict in the local church should move in cycles like these. Intensity is followed by calm. Tension is followed by release. Murk is followed by clarity. My thesis has been a pastoral expedition on an unclouded day, a moment of low-intensity conflict, to make the case that the Old Testament already has an ongoing intertextual conversation about storm preparedness that the church should pay attention to. By contrast, much writing on local church conflict focuses on the most intense phases of conflict cycles, when storms are at their fiercest. These are the phases that are the hardest to do anything about.³ My thesis invites pastors and

¹ Lederach and Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*, 12–14.

² Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 66, 109; John Paul Lederach and Janice Moomaw Jenner, “So What Have We Learned?,” in *Into the Eye of the Storm: A Handbook of International Peacebuilding*, eds. John Paul Lederach and Janice Moomaw Jenner (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 319.

³ Bullard, Jr., *Every Congregation Needs a Little Conflict*, 106–23.

leaders to learn the Old Testament's theological language and join its conversation, so that we may grow wiser and more prudent in our stewardship of the church's conflict cycles.

Conflict storms can be a resource to those leaders who have prepared well. My image of conflict preparedness for the church is not a fortified wall. I imagine the church as a garden. Our church's leaders are the caretakers of the garden, training, laboring, and preparing to benefit from the rains to come while also mitigating the damage that stormy weather brings. How should I assess what our team of leaders has accomplished for our garden during their participation in my training, in terms of theological formation? In other words, what have we done to prepare ourselves for the growth of future fruit from our soil?

Our leaders tended the soil of the church's garden during the cyclical routines of my Bible study to encourage early growth. A well-tended garden becomes resilient enough to withstand the beating of the rainy season. In the analysis of participant responses in chapters 4–7, I made the case that our training developed four elements of conflict preparedness. The participating leaders have grown in their imaginative fluency with the Old Testament's theological language, practiced Lederach's conflict transformation skillset, and developed the empathy of practical wisdom. Some have even rehumanized enemies. Any of these four elements would be a worthy goal on its own, but by holding these elements in the resonant cycles of my Bible study's routines, the elements were mutually reinforced. These elements were not solutions in search of a problem, or a Procrustean bed. I think of these elements rather as summer fruits ahead of conflict (Amos 8:1–2). The routines of the Bible study produced these early fruits.

Not only is storm survival possible, new fruit is also possible before the next storm. In this theological interpretation of the training course, I articulate how the practices of quiet writing, conversational routines, and role-play produced the fruits of conflict preparedness.

8.2 Water and Sunshine: Slow Relational Routines for Leaders

The rain of Old Testament conflict yielded more fruit than I anticipated. Relational routines were like the water and sunshine by which enmeshed roots bore the four summer fruits of the training. Had some other form of conflict training been implemented for the same group of individuals in a civic club, the outcomes would have been different. Because local church conflict is a storm of theological language and emotion, the Bible study's routines of quiet writing exercises, conversational routines, and role-plays provided slow cycles of relational watering and sunshine to transform the local church's bad weather.

Because constructive cycles are slow, conflict preparedness inherently defies measurement. It is not like storm shutters on a coastal home, evident to all. Yet the absence of preparation becomes painfully evident when peace is gone from the local church. It is a peculiar quirk of human nature that we are more distressed by the absence of peace than we are appreciative of peace when it is present in our church. I suspect this has to do with the human tendency to respond more strongly to negative stimuli,⁴ and probably just as much to do with our brokenness in sin. We do not appreciate peace because we are not yet Christ-like. Since we do not often give thanks for peace in our local church, it is difficult for us to give priority to the slow, cyclical routines that transform storms. The fruits deriving from these slow routines may be invisible, but we know when the fruit is missing. Missing fruit means that we have skipped our gardening routines. Let us not forget to tend our gardens. Here is how we tended ours.

⁴ Guido Peeters and Janusz Czapinski, "Positive-Negative Asymmetry in Evaluations: The Distinction Between Affective and Informational Negativity Effects," *European Review of Social Psychology* 1, no. 1 (1990): 33–60.

8.2.1 Writing: Slow Linguistic Watering for Local Church Leaders

Conflict transformation is slow, sometimes discouraging work. A criticism of my work might be that my analysis of the written responses is a stretch, that participants' responses indicate too little to know if any significant changes have occurred at all. Have we watered the soil to no effect? It looks like nothing is happening! It would be an error to say that nothing significant happened simply because a participating leader never shouted out "Eureka!" Our routines are cyclical work. The writing was a gardening routine, an exercise in theological formation enmeshed with other routines: teaching, role-play, conversation, and group reading. Writing was only one routine within the total resonance of the group process.⁵ The cyclical patterns in which we paused to write were a spiritual gardening routine.

As a spiritual practice, having the participating leaders pause to write their responses to the Old Testament texts slowed the leaders down into an uncharacteristically quiet stillness. Writing can be slow emotional work. It is a different reflective process than speaking, so it yields different insight. The practice of pausing to write twice in each session had a cyclical, cumulative effect on the group.⁶ Time seemed to slow down during the quiet of the written responses, but especially during the second writing pause in each session. The group was uncomfortable and antsy with the quiet of writing in session 1, but far more comfortable and still by the final writing pause of session 5. The empathic language and new theological insights found in the second sets of in-session responses are one small but observable change that this spiritual watering-in produced.

⁵ Lederach and Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*, 88–99.

⁶ Speed B. Leas and Paul Kittlaus, *Church Fights: Managing Conflict in the Local Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 146–49.

I suspect that the group reading of the poetic texts from the Old Testament also enhanced the quiet of the second writing pause. Lederach includes poetry in his trainings, sometimes even poetry composition exercises in long trainings. By comparison, my poetic selections are very short, not epic. But our group reading a few verses of Old Testament poetry each session is comparable to Lederach's use of haiku.⁷ These short poetic texts were highly evocative, enhancing our sense of quiet after reading. The poetry's quietness enhanced the watering-in routine of the writing exercises.

8.2.2 Enmeshed Roots: Conversational Routines in the Participating Leaders' Slow Relational Work

One limitation of my study is that the written responses only document the development of the participants as individuals. But if the written responses were a slow watering, then the shared conversation around scriptural texts and role-plays encouraged interlocking root formations among the group.⁸ The group's conversational practices were telling, albeit difficult to capture in writing. I suspect that the conversational routines were even more important for the church's relational life than what any of the participants reported in their writing.

A virtue of some botanical growth is the enmeshed root system by which plants provide one another with mutual support. The plants in the garden do not live and die alone, because there is an intertwined root structure. Leaders in the church need the time together to do relational work so that these enmeshed roots can form. This Bible study benefited our local church's life by giving time and space to converse together about what makes for relational health, but without the

⁷ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 65–73; see also Lederach and Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*, 170–92.

⁸ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 76–78.

pressure of an outcome-driven agenda. No decisions had to be made. We had what Lederach calls “relational space” for the gift of each other’s time and attention.⁹ Our routine of group conversations was non-linear. We enjoyed the freedom of lingering in conversations around the texts and role-plays. For once, the leaders participating in my training did not have to vote or decide anything. They were able to practice their theological language during the routine of slow relational work.

Lederach himself uses metaphors of enmeshment not as negative images of conflict but as the interdependent reality of a community’s relational life. Enmeshed relationships are the network through which conflict processes and peaceful processes flow.¹⁰ The Bible study’s conversational routines were an attempt to supply peaceful preparations to the participating leaders so that the invasive roots of destructive conflict did not have room to grow.

The church’s garden must keep growing in constructive cycles. Group life becomes anxious when there is a lack of momentum. Just as conflict is inevitable, seasons of dormancy and low momentum are also inevitable. These are the seasons when the invasive root structures of unhealthy conflict come into the field of the church. When a group feels it is going nowhere and growing nowhere, it falls into destructive conflict, as Miriam and Aaron fall into conflict with Moses in the wilderness (Num 12:1–2). Furthermore, a painful pastoral transition, a community trauma, or a betrayal of trust by leadership can upset the soil, giving invasive roots space to entangle healthy growth. Even a strong mission statement and a group of devout leaders are not enough to carry a church’s life through such conflict.¹¹ These crises require years of healing

⁹ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 75.

¹⁰ Lederach, 76–77.

¹¹ Hunsinger and Latini, *Transforming Church Conflict*, 174–75.

before new root structures grow. But even in these dormant seasons some roots remain in the garden, providing invisible support and a slow, small amount of nourishment. Those roots help the garden resist sudden shocks. This Bible study gives church leaders peaceful momentum through a healthful set of conversational routines. The relational growth of these enmeshed roots continues even after our training ended. The full benefits of the conversational routines are revealed the next time a storm shakes the garden to its roots.

The design of the Bible study as a focus group contributed to these healthy root-forming routines. The participants' conversational routines as a focus group saturated the soil, promoting relational root enmeshment. In the literature on focus groups, George Kamberelis and Greg Dimitriadis argue that a focus group can "saturate understandings." On this point, Kamberelis and Dimitriadis find watered-in imagery helpful, as do I. The group's relationships allow collective conversation to supplement what is learned by written instruments.¹² The group itself benefits from the research, not the researcher only. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis use even more agrarian language for this process, noting the peculiar way in which focus groups can "cultivate *communitas*." A focus group's sense of community can take on a life of its own even after the group has ended.¹³ Lederach intends this same effect with his trainings: the start of healthful cycles that beget more healthful cycles.¹⁴ My Bible study was a hybrid plant, both focus group and conflict training. By placing this unique plant in our garden, we engaged in conversation about the Old Testament's conflicts, and we cultivated this enmeshed, relational root growth.

¹² George Kamberelis and Greg Dimitriadis, *Focus Groups: From Structured Interviews to Collective Conversations* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 48–49.

¹³ Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 72.

¹⁴ Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*, 113–14.

Growing roots takes time. The participants in my training are busy Christian leaders, not only in the church but in their jobs and our community. They rarely slow down when we come together as a church. These are the worker bees. It is precious to have enough time together in this training to do emotional work—to water the garden of our church. Our emotional work is also cyclical work. One cannot say, “There, I finished watering that plant. Now it will grow on its own.” One must come back to water again, till soil again, and after the harvest, plan another rotation for next season. Because the emotional work of conflict training is slow and cyclical, its relational effects are almost imperceptible if we do not know what we are looking for. However, what is far more perceptible is work that has not been done at all. A barren, thirsty plot of soil—a church in destructive conflict—is a sign that the slow watering of relational work did not happen. It is worth taking the time to do this slow work now to prepare for the storms that will bring hard rains later. A few highlights from our role-plays will demonstrate how our slow, emotional work cultivates relational roots.

8.2.2.1 Role-Playing as Imaginative Enmeshment

The role-plays allowed the group to experience with their imaginations what difficult conversations feel like during conflict, without having to go through the pain of an actual conflict. The scenarios drawn from the Old Testament were like storm simulations, in which we could practice without anyone being hurt. In session 2, during the first iteration of the role-play of Judg 12:1–6, the participants who played as the Ephraimites made the retort that the Gileadites were not actually a part of God’s chosen people (12:4). Afterward in the reflective conversation, one person pointed out that they noticed how the whole circle of participants bristled. The group knew the damage that cutting comment would have caused in a real conflict. The comment was not harmful because it was imagined within the context of the role-play, but the group experienced the relational damage that a cutting comment has upon enmeshed roots. This was an experience

of empathic choice in relationship with one another, imaginatively role-played out of the Old Testament text.

In the second iteration of this role-play, we put into practice the skill of active listening with applied paraphrasing. The actors were supposed to avoid retorts that sound like, “I understand, but...” and respond instead with paraphrases of the statement their opponent had just made. We chuckled as each participant in the scene had to backpedal every time they said, “I understand, but...”. It took us each a few tries before we could beat this habit. That was a moment when we were training one another. The prior existing enmeshment of the group, our relational roots, made the imaginative experience meaningful. We learned and grew as a team.

8.2.2.2 Enmeshment with Saturated Theological Understanding

Another example of our enmeshment was theological insight uncovered together. We experienced instances of *saturated theological understanding*, to elaborate on Kamberelis and Dimitradis’s phrase. During the conversation in session 3 after reading through Schlimm’s Ezra-Ruth dialogue aloud, one person made the connection that Jesus having Ruth in his ancestry means that he has a small trace of Moabite ancestry. This disoriented our group’s shared assumption that Jewishness is all about race or purity of blood. I recall how quickly the group favored Ruth after we completed the dialogue. I then gave more perspective on Ezra’s community and the pressure he felt trying to hold his community’s identity together.¹⁵ I was trying to rehumanize Ezra and his community, which had also endured hardship that is difficult for us in our context to appreciate. A few swung back to empathize with Ezra after that. We closed by praying in unison a prayer I wrote from the point of view of Ruth. One person wrote, “Discussion

¹⁵ Schlimm, *This Strange and Sacred Scripture*, 223.

[...] was extremely good” (3, S3, R4). It was good because this tense conversation is voiced within the Old Testament itself. We were saturated in the Old Testament’s theological conversation together.

A second example of this form of saturated theological conversation came when I sparked a debate about the identity of Jacob’s wrestling partner. I asked if the wrestler might be Esau in disguise, and what do we notice in the passage that leads us to make up our mind about the wrestler’s identity. Since it is a widely held assumption that the wrestling partner is God, this simple question opened a lively conversation about whether the person could have been Jesus, with counterpoints about whether Jesus as the wrestler would dilute the doctrine of the incarnation. We drew comparisons between the compassionate qualities Esau shares with Jesus as God’s image in this narrative. We noted that Jacob himself compares Esau’s face to the “face of God” (33:10) and that Esau runs to Jacob, throws his arms around Jacob’s neck, and kisses him (33:4), echoing the same three motions of the loving father in Jesus’s parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:20). We heard how the theological language of the Old Testament is also spoken in the New Testament. Because the narrative of Gen 32:22–32 is elusive about the wrestler’s identity, the narrative evokes our imagination like a good conversation partner.¹⁶ It was important for the theological saturation of the group’s roots that the participants hash this out together. They agreed to disagree. This saturation might not have happened in a conventional Bible study. Because we were discussing these passages within a frame of conflict and peace, the theological issue resounded. The stakes were higher. The conversation was saturated.

¹⁶ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 114–30.

8.2.2.3 Enmeshed Laughter: The Sunshine Warming Roots

The best surprise of the training course was the healthy amount of laughter we shared. The role-play exercises transformed the weighty subject of conflict into play. Our work was serious to be sure, but to be serious unto bleakness would have been like watering our garden only to cover the plants and soil away from the warmth of the sun.¹⁷ Root temperatures matter. Without cycles of root warmth in between bad weather, fruit-bearing trees do not thrive. The role-plays were the group's way of providing its own source of relational warmth, without which the other routines of the training would have fallen cold.

In session 1 our actors playing Joseph's brothers were hilarious in their reluctance to ask Joseph for forgiveness. The actors treated each other exactly like brothers! They jawed as if in the locker room. The elder brothers teased Joseph like a younger brother. They brought up the sore subject of Joseph being falsely accused of involvement with Potiphar's wife. They could have carried the role-play for fifteen minutes if I had let them. We only stopped due to time. Strangers could not have role-played like this. These participants were able to do so because they had prior roots. They knew each other's senses of humor.

In session 4, the group invited me to play Nabal, which I did with a certain zest. Our role-player for Abigail threw my Nabal under the metaphorical bus in order to save the rest of her household from David's warriors. This first attempt at role-play did not teach the skill of centered speaking, but it did create a lot of unexpected laughter and empathy for Abigail as she tried to get out of the tight spot Nabal's foolishness had landed her in. After a break to compose ourselves, my Nabal and the David actor figured out centered speaking on our second try. Our levity not

¹⁷ Lederach and Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*, 166.

only made learning the conflict transformation skill enjoyable, laughter made Abigail, David, and Nabal come alive. The Old Testament's language lived once again.

Group laughter is a marker of relational space.¹⁸ Bursts of laughter were counterpoints to the quiet pauses of writing. The opposing effects of a room filled with laughter that then moved to quiet reflection became a rhythm that I can only describe as holy. Over time as the group fell into its new routines, our routines became our rhythms, and the rhythms became resonant.¹⁹ The quiet of the writing process was not the hushed concentration of a classroom. It was a stillness akin to a silent retreat. This enmeshment cultivated by the training, so hard to quantify, was the camaraderie that is the dream of every effective small group ministry. The whole fruit is more than the sum of the knowledge conveyed. It is laughter, insight, pregnant silence, and follow-up conversations outside the training room. It is that *communitas* Kamberelis and Dimitriadis speak of. It is the warmth of the sun on surface roots.

8.3 Slow Preparedness: Conclusions for Pastors Training Leaders in the Local Church

Since Lederach works extensively building peace in violent settings, one may ask whether my use of his work is appropriate. In the face of so much physical violence and polarization in our broken world, what difference does it make for a group of local church leaders in North America to train in conflict preparedness? The sobering state of the global human condition makes conflict in a local church look like the pettiest of concerns by comparison. However, there is a connection. The local church has a high calling from God to be

¹⁸ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 75.

¹⁹ Lederach and Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*, 197–200.

transformative in the pain and tragedies of our communities. We cannot engage that transformative work while we ourselves are caught in destructive storm cycles. My training is a modest effort to restore that transformative capacity of the local church.

I noticed in the conversations of sessions 3–5 that as participants grew in their ability to articulate better conflict, they themselves made the connection between the church’s destructive conflicts and the need for transformation in our world’s destructive conflicts. I did not have to make the connection for them. They beat me to it and articulated it. Fruit was growing within the participating leaders’ gardening routines. The work of conflict transformation is, as Lederach argues, generative and resonant. Once a constructive cycle begins, it takes on a life of its own. The church’s roots may grow once again to transform storm-battered communities.

Lederach’s metaphor about web-watchers, those who study the webs of spiders, has influenced my metaphor of the enmeshed relational roots. He describes his experience with web-watchers, how sensitive they are to small, almost microscopic movements of a strand of web shimmering in the sunlight. Web-watchers move slowly because a spider’s web is prone to disruption by fast movements. Lederach uses this metaphor to describe the light touch he applies to training communities in conflict.²⁰

Much like watching a spider’s web, enmeshed roots are another slow metaphor for relational connections in the local church. Each of those connections may seem negligible on its own but is supportive and nourishing when in a network. This training experience provided me with far more than data for evaluation of my Bible study’s design. The participating leaders’ relational work increased my constructive enmeshment as a pastor, by learning with my own

²⁰ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 101–11.

leaders. Our pre-existing relationships were not a deterrent. Our work was enhanced far more because of those prior relationships than if an outside trainer came in to train us. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis have noted how an ethnographer’s “pre-existing social network” can lead to groundbreaking new research when the human subjects in that network are treated with dignity.²¹ The pre-existent relationships are a network of roots that would otherwise lie subterranean, unavailable for research. The training helped me as a pastor empathically understand the people whom I serve and lead. It gave me the chance to move slowly with my leaders through our network of relationships without disturbing what lies beneath the surface.

As Strawn says, “The Old Testament is dying,” but its buried roots intertwine with those of the church.²² Conflict is a storm of language and emotion, but metaphors can be reimagined. In seasons of low-intensity conflict, before the next storm, a pastor training in conflict preparedness with their own leaders can speak the Old Testament’s theological language to shorten the cultural distance between pastor and church. By closing that distance, the sound of human speech resonates with the hidden work of God. Within that resonance, the Old Testament’s theological language becomes the church’s “healing tongue”—a poetic title bestowed by the wise on the Bible’s most elusive tree (Prov 15:4, JPS). The Old Testament with its buried roots may once again flourish as the tree of life at the center of the church’s garden.²³ In its emotive and linguistic symbiosis with the church, the Old Testament provides the pastor with gentle access to the

²¹ Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, *Focus Groups*, 62.

²² Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying*, 4.

²³ David L. Lieber et al., *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001). I am indebted to these scholars for the metaphor of Scripture as the tree of life.

church's subterranean processes that are hidden from sight. Slowly but surely, rain and sun nourish "tangled" roots.²⁴

²⁴ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 76–77.

Appendix A: Forgotten Fighting Words

Forgotten Fighting Words: The Feuds and Forgiveness in the Old Testament We Didn't Know We Needed

SESSION 1 • Joseph and the Elder Brothers

TRAINER OUTLINE

- Opening prayer
- Intro to study: Guiding beliefs (Repeat these at every session intro)
 - Cannot stop all conflict – necessary for growth
 - But still, conflict often uncomfortable
 - Leaders can play a part in healing wounds and preventing wounds.
 - Preparation for conflict – helps us do no harm – helps us heal
- Explain the model of this study
 - Bible
 - OT passages of in-group conflict
 - Not Moses vs. Pharaoh
 - More like Joseph vs. his brothers
 - We leaders can learn skills by studying these passages.
 - Imagination & the training model
 - Engage OT passages with imagination
 - Each passage will help us practice a conflict transformation skill.
 - Put yourself in their shoes.
 - We will do role-plays – you might think differently about Joseph and his brothers after putting yourself in their shoes.
- Intro to OT fluency
 - Living vicariously in these conflicts – learn in our gut the spiritual truth of the OT
 - We need OT in order to know the NT, because NT writers saturated in the OT.
 - We hit 2 birds with 1 stone – more interesting to do OT and conflict together.
- “Intro” Response Sheets
- 1st Narrative Reading: Gen 37:12–28; 50:15–21 – volunteers read
 - Response sheets for session 1 (5 minutes)
- Teaching / conversation on Gen 37 & 50
 - Explain Israel’s family origins period in OT
 - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob had 10 sons, then Joseph, later Benjamin
 - Pre-Egypt

- Tell briefly Joseph’s story of being enslaved, his dreams, his rise to Pharaoh’s right hand, Joseph foresees famine, stockpiles grain, his brothers come to Egypt to buy grain.
 - Joseph reveals himself to his brothers after giving them a good scare!
 - For more, read Gen 42–45
 - What do you think about how Joseph treated his brothers in Gen 50?
 - Did Joseph go through a transformation to forgive his brothers?
 - What was God up to, getting Joseph from pit in Gen 37 to forgive his brothers in Gen 50?
 - Conversation
 - What attitude made Joseph’s brothers want to hurt him? Were their feelings justified?
 - Do you think that Joseph’s brothers really trusted him when they met Joseph in Egypt at the height of Joseph’s power?
- Role-play of Joseph & brothers – skill: conscientization / self-awareness-in-context
 - Let’s use biblical imagination – envision ourselves as Joseph & brothers.
 - Motivation prompts
 - Perform the role-play
 - Conversation about group behaviors. Did some things escalate conflict or de-escalate conflict?
 - Conflict transformation skill: self-awareness-in-context– go over this skill in handout, read the prompts for this skill in the handout.
- Poetic reading: Ps 133
 - Each time, we share an OT passage with a story + OT poetry
 - Explain parallelism in OT poetry
 - Poetry deals with conflict a lot
 - Poetry of OT opens up spiritual imagination
 - Volunteer reads Ps 133
 - Explain anointing of Aaron the high priest
 - Significance of Hermon & Zion as Northern & Southern Kingdoms after division of Israel
 - Ask: How does this relate to Joseph & brothers?
- 2nd Narrative reading: Gen 37:12–28; 50:15–21, by volunteer
- Conversation: What is the Holy Spirit telling us based on all that we’ve done tonight?
- 5-minutes: Complete second response sheet for session 1
- Closing prayer

SESSION 2 • Shibboleth Kin-slayings

TRAINER OUTLINE

- Opening prayer – volunteer
- Intro to study: repeat guiding beliefs
- 1st Narrative reading: Judg 12:1–6 – volunteers read
 - Distribute response sheets
- 5-minutes to complete responses
- Teaching / conversation on Judg 12:1–6
 - Judg 17:6 “Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.”
 - Tribes had infighting, sometimes unity.
 - Sometimes alliances with neighbors like Gileadites
 - But also some classic enemies such as Ammonites
 - Look at map together – tribal boundaries during Judges period
 - Notice Ephraim & Gilead in relation to Ammonite territory
- Role-play of Ephraimites & Gileadites – skill: Active listening with applied paraphrasing
 - Let’s use biblical imagination – envision ourselves as the tribal elders of Ephraim and Gilead
 - Motivation prompts
 - 5-minutes role-play using harmful conflict techniques
 - 1-minute open share – What made the conflict worse?
 - Teaching active listening with applied paraphrasing
 - 5-minute role-play using active listening with applied paraphrasing
- Poetic reading: Ps 55:12–14
 - Like so many other psalms, in this one, the enemy seems to be someone “next door.”
- 2nd Narrative reading: Judg 12:1–6 by volunteer
- Conversation: What is the Holy Spirit telling us based on all that we’ve done tonight?
- 5-minutes to complete response sheet
- Closing prayer

SESSION 3 • Ruth & Ezra

TRAINER OUTLINE

- Opening prayer – volunteer
- Intro to study: repeat guiding beliefs
- 1st Narrative reading: Ezra 9:1–10:19 – volunteers read
 - *Volunteer 1: Ezra 9:1–4*
 - *Volunteer 2: 9:5–9*
 - *Volunteer 3: 9:10–15*
 - *Volunteer 4: 10:1–4*
 - *Volunteer 5: 10:5–11*
 - *Volunteer 6: 10:12–19*
 - 5 minutes complete responses
- Teaching / conversation on Ezra 9:1–10:19
 - Ezra's remnant, returned to Judah because of decree of Artaxerxes (7:11–28).
 - Returning remnant felt pressure to meld with the other cultures of people who had been moved *into* Judah 586–538 BC by the Babylonians. Just as the Jews had been moved out of the promised land, others had been moved in.
- Poetic reading: Ruth 1:16–18, volunteer reads
 - Recap story of Ruth
 - Book of Ruth takes place hundreds of years before exile and return to the Promised Land.
 - Ruth – ancestor of King David, (she's named in Matt 1:5)
 - Ruth – from Moab, Israel's rival. She's not a native-born Jewish woman.
 - Faithful foreigner, commits to God of Israel, like Uriah the Hittite (2 Sam 11).
- Prepare for dialogue between Ruth and Ezra – skill: Problem lens & solution lens
 - Back-and-forth in OT: God's chosen must be faithful – also reach beyond their own borders to people not yet God's own
 - Use our biblical imagination: Imaginary conversation between Ezra and Ruth
 - Bear in mind, they lived hundreds of years apart.
 - But their stories are related.
- Reading Schlimm's dialogue
 - Conversation: Who did you agree with more? Ruth or Ezra?
 - Share quote from Matthew Schlimm who wrote the dialogue.
 - Conflict transformation skill: problem lens & solution lens
 - Conversation questions: Focus on defining problems and developing solutions, not about who's to blame.
- 2nd Narrative reading: Ezra 9:1–10:19, by same volunteers in series

- Conversation: What is the Holy Spirit telling us based on all that we've done tonight?
- 5-minutes to complete second response sheet
- Closing prayer

SESSION 4 • David, Nabal, & Abigail

TRAINER OUTLINE

- Opening prayer – volunteer
- Intro to study: repeat guiding beliefs
- 1st Narrative reading: 1 Sam 25:2–42 – volunteers read
 - *Volunteer 1*: 1 Sam 25:2–8
 - *Volunteer 2*: 25:9–11
 - *Volunteer 3*: 25:12–17
 - *Volunteer 4*: 25:18–22
 - *Volunteer 5*: 25:23–31
 - *Volunteer 6*: 25:32–35
 - *Volunteer 7*: 25:36–42
 - 5 minutes to complete responses
- Teaching / conversation on 1 Sam 25:2–42
 - Show map of biblical Maon and Carmel.
 - Hospitality to guests in Ancient Near East – Nabal made a big guest-host foul.
 - Other example: Abraham and 3 angelic visitors, Abraham gets it right! (Gen 18:1-15)
 - The fool in Proverbs (Prov 11:29; 14:1, 3, 7–9, 16–17, 24; 15:2, 5, 7, 14, 20–21; 17:28)
 - Nabal – Meanings of biblical names show their character.
 - Abigail – wise woman, kind words, makes amends as the good host her husband should have been
- Poetic reading: Ps 23:5
 - Table fellowship in biblical world
 - To share table means you have guest-host relationship
 - Sharing table begins ongoing relationship of a guest-host covenant
- Role-play: David, Nabal, and Abigail – Skill: centered speaking
 - Motivations
 - Role-play part 1: David asks Nabal for food.
 - Role-play part 2: Abigail brings food to David and apologizes for Nabal’s stinginess. David is still angry. Abigail needs to calm David down, otherwise Nabal and all his men will be killed.
- Conversation: What made Abigail’s approach to David work out?
 - Conflict transformation skill: Centered speaking
- Role-play part 3: David and Nabal get a “do-over.” They use centered speaking, using “I” and “my” language instead of “you” blaming language. Each one focuses on their own responsibility for what they can do to get to a solution.
- 2nd Narrative reading: 1 Sam 25:2–42 by same volunteers in series

- Conversation: What is the Holy Spirit telling us based on all that we've done tonight?
- 5-minutes: Complete second response sheet
- Closing prayer

SESSION 5 • Jacob & Esau

TRAINER OUTLINE

- Opening prayer - Volunteer
- Intro to study: Repeat guiding beliefs
- Brief teaching: Remember Jacob and Esau's backstory, Jacob received Isaac's blessing, Esau became a wandering hunter/warrior over a band of men, like David and his men when he was on the run from Saul? (Gen 27)
- 1st Narrative reading: Part 1: Gen 32:1–21– volunteers read
 - *Volunteer 1*: 32:1–6
 - *Volunteer 2*: 32:7–12
 - *Volunteer 3*: 32:13–21
- Teaching & conversation on part 1
 - Rhetorical question: Why did we go backward in the OT story?
 - We began with Joseph and his brothers, now we are going back to Joseph's father Jacob.
 - OT has echoes that move both forward and backward.
 - After hearing Joseph's conflict with his brothers, maybe we will see Jacob and Esau in a different light, because we have already seen what happens with Jacob and his children.
 - Listen for more similarities and differences.
 - Jacob's 3 waves of lavish gifts, lots of generosity or a cautious approach? Did Jacob just put his family as a human shield between him and Esau?
- 1st Narrative reading: Part 2: Gen 32:22–31, 1 volunteer reads
- Teaching & conversation
 - Show map of Jabbok river and photo of modern Zarqa River (Arabic name)
 - Conversation: "Who was the man at the river? God? Jesus? An angel? Esau?"
 - Regardless of who you think the mysterious man is, share with the group your reasoning.
 - Names are important in the Bible. Why do you think Jacob wanted to know the mysterious wrestling man's name?
 - Evidently Jacob wanted a blessing from the wrestling man so much that Jacob kept wrestling him even after the man injured him. Why did Jacob want a blessing from the mysterious man? Is this related to the birthright blessing Jacob snatched away from Esau? (27:1–41)
- 1st Narrative reading: Part 3: Gen 33:1–17, by volunteers
 - *Volunteer 1*: Gen 33:1–5
 - *Volunteer 2*: 33:6–11
 - *Volunteer 3*: 33:12–17

- Teaching & conversation
 - Jacob is cautious, but he gives way to Esau’s kindness.
 - Esau runs to Jacob, where does this happen in the NT? The father in Jesus’s parable runs to meet the prodigal son. (Luke 15:20)
 - Running to meet someone was undignified in Ancient Near Eastern cultures, but Esau abandons decorum because he’s so eager to see Jacob.
 - Jacob compares seeing Esau again to seeing the face of God, this is a dangerous privilege in Exod 33:20–23, in which Moses is hidden from God’s face in the cleft of a rock.
 - Reconciliation: like a meeting with God
 - In reconciliation we are vulnerable
 - Blessing of being vulnerable—God starts to work in that relationship, renewing us on the other side of conflict.
 - But...that doesn’t mean everything is instantly “Okay” after reconciliation, notice on the map, Jacob apparently lied and doesn’t go to Seir, he goes opposite direction to Succoth! (33:14–17)
- Response Sheet
 - Give 5 minutes to complete responses
- Poetic Reading: Ps 85:10, by volunteer
 - Symbol of the kiss in ancient Near Eastern cultures.
 - Kissing not always romantic. Sign of family loyalty or loyalty to a ruler (Ps 2:12)
 - Notice that Esau kisses Jacob, and then they weep together. (Gen 33:4)
- Conversation: What does it mean for righteousness (or justice) and peace to kiss?
- Role-play: Jacob & Esau (2 volunteers): Conflict transformation skill: Encounter
 - Motivations
 - Set the scenario
 - Jacob and Esau, you meet each other the day after Jacob wrestles with the mysterious man. Jacob you have to walk with a limp.
 - Esau you don’t know that Jacob is hurt. When you meet him, you hugged him, so that “smarted” his injury even more!
 - You just finished weeping.
 - How do you make peace with each other? What will you say?
 - Do you offer explanation for the hard things between you in the past?
 - Do you bring up your present fears?
- Conversation – What did you see between Jacob and Esau that helped them reconcile in this encounter?
- Conflict transformation skill: Encounter
 - How many times have you avoided someone you had cross words with?
 - Usually we are concerned conflict will get intense again.
 - We’ve all been avoidant before!

- This conflict with Jacob and Esau is surprising, because even though there's no avoiding the conflict, at least one person (Esau) comes to the encounter with a new heart.
- 2nd Narrative reading: Gen 33:1–11, by 1 volunteer in interest of time
 - Teaching: Genesis is a book about origins but also about the future God's people are headed toward.
 - Connections: Jacob makes peace, does this echo the peace that Cain and Abel could never find? What about Jacob's sons after they reconciled to Joseph? Joseph still warns them on their way home, "Do not argue on the way!" (45:24).
- Conversation: Based on what we have read in Genesis and the peacemaking story of Jacob and Esau, what is the Holy Spirit telling us about our own conflict? How God can help us when we are in conflict?
- 5-minutes: Complete second response sheet
- 5-minutes: Complete "Closing" response sheet
- Closing prayer

Appendix B: Preparedness Methodology: Designing a Bible Study as Both Focus Group and Conflict Training

B.1 Adapting Powell's Method for Collecting Focus Group Responses to Scripture

To prepare local church leaders well for future storm cycles, the method of training needs to be scripturally informed and practical. To allow me to evaluate the training's outcomes, I also needed my method to generate data. Powell's responsive Bible study method fulfills these requirements. He demonstrates how a Bible study can double as a focus group by collecting written responses from the participants after reading a scriptural text.¹ I applied his method both as a means of written reflection and as an instrument of focus group data collection. In this appendix, I explain why those features of his method matter for my analysis of the responses in chapters 4–7.²

Powell's findings support my claim in chapter 2 that pastors and their leaders inhabit different subcultures. His research demonstrates that the process of acquiring technical skill in biblical studies produces "gaps" in "empathy choice."³ For example, when hearing a Gospel text, clergy's written responses reveal that they empathize with Jesus in the narrative, while laity tend to empathize with the disciples or other people in the text. At a hermeneutical level, the empathic tendencies of scholars and seminary-trained pastors diverge greatly from the empathic tendencies

¹ Powell, *What Do They Hear?*, 40–50, 77–89.

² Review of my research method is located under protocol 2023-0191, Duke University Campus Institutional Review Board.

³ Powell, 54–64.

of laity. Therefore, many pastors experience their church emotionally and relationally as a cross-cultural context.

Powell's Bible study method employs New Testament texts. The research literature lacks a similar study of empathic responses to Old Testament texts. I use Powell's method to evaluate how well my Bible study develops the four elements of participating leaders' conflict preparedness. His method helps me become a more effective trainer within Lederach's approach by "bridging the gap" between pastor and laity.⁴

B.2 Terms and Organization of Responses

When Lederach describes his conflict transformation practices, he avoids terms with linear connotations. This is a conscious decision to foster non-linear cycles of responses, which Lederach contends are more effective in generating long-lasting transformation. In place of linear terms such as "project" and "results," Lederach favors the terms "initiative" and "outcomes."⁵ I do the same. By necessity a thesis limits me to analyzing my training as a bounded project. However, I adopt Lederach's terms in my research because my Bible study is one initiative within my broader practice of Lederach's approach to conflict transformation.

For the sake of brevity I have not transcribed every response in the study, but I analyze responses in chapters 4–7 that illustrate the limits and merits of my Bible study's design. My purpose in sharing participant responses is not to evaluate those responses *in se*, but to assess how the Bible study cultivates the four elements of conflict preparedness as a transformative outcome.

⁴ Powell, *What Do They Hear?*, 22.

⁵ Lederach, *Building Peace*, 132.

I organized the participants' responses by a key number system. The in-session prompts are session-specific and are identified Q1.1, Q1.2, Q2.1, etc. The introductory and closing prompts served as evaluative bookends at the beginning and at the conclusion of the entire training course. These bookend prompts were identical in order to facilitate before-after comparison and are referred to as P1, P2, P3, etc. The following example illustrates how I cite responses in my analysis:

[Quoted response] (6, S4, R2.2)

6 = Key number for Participant 6

S4 = the training session number (1-5)

R2.2 = response to prompt Q2.2, the second set of responses for that session.

Note that R4 appears only in the second set of in-session responses, so it does not have a decimal.

B.2.1 In-Session First Responses

I collected written responses from each session in two sets per session in a before-after pattern. In the first set of responses the participants wrote immediately after reading the text together for the first time. Prompts for the first set of responses in each session appear as in the following example:

First Reading of Scripture

Q1.1: Free write, what do you notice going on in this passage?

Q2.1: What is the conflict in this passage?

Q3.1: What is God up to in this conflict?

The first set of responses are phrased to elicit an expression of the participant's current theological fluency. The order of the prompts moves from objective to more subjective and theological. Q1.1 prompts a more objective response about the narrative details of the passage.

Q2.1 invites a slightly more subjective response. The participant must articulate what details of the narrative seem relevant to describe the conflict. A participant may answer this question with objective details about the conflict in the text, or the person may respond with more subjective interpretation about what dynamics underly the conflict. Q3.1 prompts a creative theological response, eliciting from the participant their articulation about what God's activity may be in the text.

As I discuss further in chapter 3, I selected these texts because each in some way includes the hiddenness of God as a narrative feature that elicits the theological imagination of the participants. This final Q3.1 is open-ended, so that a participant may practice theological fluency within the imaginative space of the text.⁶ The hiddenness of God in the text provided the opportunity to observe participants' imaginative theological fluency as-is before they engaged in the exercises of a session.

B.2.2 In-Session Second Responses

By the time each session approached its conclusion, our group had prayed, discussed the narrative and poetic texts, role-played, and practiced a conflict transformation skill. Before the group wrote their second sets of responses, we read the narrative text again in order to hear with new ears and to allow the Holy Spirit a time to show us any other benefits of the training. This second reading was a practice of Lederach's "sonic metaphor" in our group work.⁷ The second set of prompts appear as in the following example just before the session's closing prayer.

⁶ Lederach, *Reconcile*, 29–40. Lederach's interpretation of the Jacob-Esau narrative influenced my thinking about God's hidden activity in texts of intragroup conflict.

⁷ Lederach and Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out*, 198–224.

Second Reading of Scripture

Q1.2: Based on your experience in our training today, now what do you notice going on in this passage?

Q2.2: Based on our training today, now what do you think is the conflict in this passage?

Q3.2: Based on our training today, what is God up to in this conflict?

Q4: Have you changed your mind about anything today based on our training?

The second set of responses provides comparison with the first set in order to analyze how participants were developing the elements of conflict preparedness. Q1.2–3.2 are phrased similarly to Q1.1–3.1, with a few modifiers to nudge the participant to respond in light of what they have experienced in the session.

Q4 appears only in the second set of responses for each session, prompting participants to self-report how they developed new perspectives from the training session. The prompt is open-ended to allow participants the freedom to express whatever they feel most strongly at the session's conclusion.⁸ Therefore, Q4 is a brief but pointed prompt for the participant to self-report any significant learning, even if it resists the categories of my Bible study's design.⁹ As Lederach argues throughout his body of work, transformation of a conflict involves the personal transformations of people who themselves are involved in and affected by their community's conflict cycles.¹⁰ Therefore, it is important that participants in the training disclose to what extent

⁸ Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen, *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 16–26, 282–83. Stone and Heen recommend reducing “blocks” in qualitative responses with a final open-ended prompt.

⁹ Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, *Focus Groups*, 70.

¹⁰ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 75.

they notice any transformation occurring, not limited to the types of transformation I might have anticipated.

One may object to the phrasing of Q4 in that a “change of mind” is not the most important change necessary for conflict preparedness. However, I phrase Q4 in idiomatic language in order to elicit a non-specialist writer’s response to any change that they may have experienced. Boggling the training down in jargon widens again the cultural divide between the pastor and their local church.¹¹ Since these Old Testament texts are complex, I keep the written prompts simple to avoid the sound of a theological exam. The priority was to encounter complexity in the texts of Scripture, not complexity in the instrument of data collection.

B.3 Before-After: Method for Evaluating the Bible Study’s Cumulative Outcomes

Lederach encourages leaders working for conflict transformation to evaluate the features of an initiative for its long-term significance.¹² I assessed participants’ own sense of their conflict preparedness in a before-after instrument, so that I could judge what beneficial outcomes derived from the Bible study as a whole. In addition to the first and second sets of prompts in each session, I issued an introductory response sheet at the beginning of session 1 and a closing response sheet at the end of session 5, which was the end of the entire Bible study. The introductory and closing prompts give a window into the subjective experience of the participants.¹³ The prompts for introductory and closing sessions were identical, in order best to compare the responses as before-after data. These prompts appeared as follows:

¹¹ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 106. Lederach discourages trainers from using jargon with participants.

¹² Lederach, *Building Peace*, 129–37.

¹³ Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, 48–49.

P1: I have the skills I need to navigate conflict well.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Unsure Agree Strongly Agree

P2: I am well-prepared to handle conflict according to scriptural principles.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Unsure Agree Strongly Agree

P3: I am confident in my peacemaking abilities during conflict.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Unsure Agree Strongly Agree

P4: When I think of conflict, three words that come to mind are...

P5: I think most conflicts can be resolved by...

P6: I think most people try to resolve their conflicts by...

P7: When I think about conflict in my church, three words that come to mind are...

I analyze the responses to P1–7 in Appendix C. The prompts P1–3 collect ordinal data so that I may analyze quantitatively how the participants’ sense of their own conflict preparedness developed over the entire Bible study. In P1, the participant reports their own sense of their ability to navigate conflict. However, P2 elaborates further on P1 by adding a phrase that makes the participant assess whether they take Scripture into account in their conflicts. P3 further elaborates on P1 and P2 by distinguishing the “handling” or “navigating” of conflict from peacemaking during conflict. In this distinction, P3 examines whether the participant understands a difference between resolving conflict and creating peace. In this progression, P1–3 solicit the participant to articulate with increasing specificity what they believe about their capacities for conflict transformation. The ordinal nature of these prompts provides comparison of how the participants develop confidence in their conflict preparedness.

P4–7 collect qualitative verbal data from word-generation and sentence completion. This written data may be assessed by categorization and comparison. P4 is designed to solicit words the participants associate with conflict. P5 solicits an open-ended response to compare how

participants articulate their approach to conflict at the beginning and end of the training course. P6 presses the participants to report on the relational dynamics of conflict by describing how they perceive the conflict resolution abilities of others. P7 is another word-association prompt soliciting three words about the participants' own local church. These prompts P4–7 are verbal-focused, inviting emotional responses in order for the trainer to investigate whether the participants' theological fluency and empathic practical wisdom have developed over the duration of the Bible study.

B.4 Addressing Objections to the Method

One might object that any difference this Bible study makes is untraceable, due to the complexity of a local church's intragroup life. Lederach himself addresses the inherent difficulties in assessing training initiatives. He notes that even in profound reconciliation between enemies, the participants' responses to written prompts are sometimes underwhelming and obvious. The words may seem simple, but Lederach argues that even small developments in language signal that relationships between people involved have transformed.¹⁴

One might object further that the act of evaluating participants' subjective responses is itself a subjective act of interpretation. I do not deny it. Focus groups involve subjectivity. However, focus groups also reveal relational knowledge that would not be observable by objective instruments.¹⁵ As Powell can identify empathic patterns in the subjective responses of

¹⁴ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 164.

¹⁵ Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, *Focus Groups*, 3, 40.

the participants in his Bible study, I am able to identify patterns expressing the four elements of conflict preparedness in the responses from my Bible study as well.¹⁶

B.5 Conclusion on Method: Limitations and Outcomes

B.5.1 Limitations

My analysis leads me to conclude there were improvements that could be made to the prompts in future iterations of the training in order to overcome limitations I did not anticipate. The in-session prompts Q1 and Q2 were intended to ensure that the participant took time to articulate and understand the basic details of the passage and the conflicts within that passage. However, a few participants took their responses far beyond the face value of those beginning prompts by narrating God’s activity in response to Q1 or Q2, even though Q3 addresses this topic directly. Or the participant would describe the theological dynamics underlying a narrative even before the participant reached Q3. For example, Participant 10 wrote “law vs. grace” in their response to Q2.2 (10, S3, R2.2).

Furthermore, participants expressed elements of conflict preparedness not only in R4 as I had predicted, but earlier in their second set of responses in R1.2, R2.2, and R3.2. The elements of conflict preparedness are often found to overlap in the participants’ responses. Now that I have identified that this form of training cultivates the four elements, future research should probe deeper with more targeted prompts. However, the challenge of further targeted prompts is in keeping their length and complexity in check in order not to put a specialist’s writing burden on lay volunteers.

¹⁶ Powell, *What Do They Hear?*, 38–39.

It was sometimes difficult to determine from a few participants' responses whether they comprehended the five conflict transformation skills. For example, in the session 4 responses, many participants wrote of their admiration for Abigail's handling of conflict. However, a few participants did not articulate whether they understood centered speaking. To encourage further integrative learning of the conflict transformation skills, it may be that a prompt should challenge the participant to connect the conflict transformation skill of that session to what they have noticed in the text.

B.5.2 Outcomes

Throughout the Bible study, twenty-nine people serving in a leadership capacity in my church participated in at least one of the sessions. Twenty-one of those participated in more than one session. Eight participated in only one session. Four participated in all five sessions. (Participants 2, 7, 15, and 17). Nine were present at session 1 and session 5 to complete both the introductory and closing response sheets, which I analyze in Appendix C. The average number of participants in each session was sixteen. In chapters 4–7, I analyze the in-session responses for evidence that the participants were developing the four constitutive elements of conflict preparedness in the local church.

I concur with Lederach that the most significant fruit of conflict transformation is recognized not during the timeframe of one training course, but over the long-term horizon of a set of initiatives' cumulative outcomes. In Lederach's most intricate work, he assigns at minimum a decade as the time horizon for measuring transformation of a conflict.¹⁷ We cannot trace the effects of a single training course such as this Bible study over the span of a decade. But this

¹⁷ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 53–54; Lederach, *Building Peace*, 84–85.

Bible study as a conflict transformation training course can foster a “relational space” within the group’s existing web of connections.¹⁸ Within that relational space, participants reflect with one another about conflict. This new relational space contributes constructively to the group’s future conflict cycles.

¹⁸ Lederach, *Moral Imagination*, 75–86.

Appendix C: Anchoring Voices: Storm-Talk in the Introductory and Closing Responses

The cyclical, stormy conflicts in the local church require the trainer's evaluation to be cyclical.¹ Even though my Bible study is far shorter than Lederach's own initiatives, in this appendix I analyze the participants' introductory and closing responses P1–7 in order to demonstrate three positive effects found in the participants' self-reported data, which I collected as we progressed through the cyclical exercises of the training.² The first positive effect found in the closing responses of P1–3 is that participants perceived an increase in their conflict preparedness as an outcome of my training. The second and third positive effects found in participants' closing responses of P4–7 were their developments in imaginative theological fluency and empathy for practical wisdom. The participating leaders prepared themselves to be anchoring voices in the storm cycles of church conflict.

C.1 Quantitative Analysis of Prompts 1–3 in the Introductory and Closing Responses

In order to assess the participants' self-report of their progress, I assigned numeric values to their responses on a scale 1–5, where 1 indicates a participant's low confidence in their conflict preparedness and 5 indicates high confidence. Their responses are reported in aggregate in Table 1. Note that "All" refers to the entire group of participants who were present to respond in either session 1 or session 5. The "Completers" were present in both session 1 and session 5 and so responded to both the introductory and closing prompts. This subsample of "Completers" is

¹ Lederach, *Building Peace*, 137.

² For an explanation of my design of the introductory and closing prompts, see Appendix B, section B.4.

important because their participation over the duration of the Bible study gives a richer report of the effect that the training course had as a whole from beginning to end.

P1: I have the skills I need to navigate conflict well.				
	P1 Intro All	P1 Intro Completers	P1 Closing All	P1 Closing Completers
Range	1–5	1–4	3–5	3–5
Median	4	4	4	4
Mean	3.45	3	3.54	3.67
Stand. Dev.	1.1	1.22	0.78	0.71
n	20	9	13	9
P2: I am well-prepared to handle conflict according to scriptural principles.				
	P2 Intro All	P2 Intro Completers	P2 Closing All	P2 Closing Completers
Range	1–5	1–3	1–4	1–4
Median	3	2	4	4
Mean	2.65	2.25	3.42	3.38
Stand. Dev.	0.81	0.71	0.9	1.06
n	20	8	12	8
P3: I am confident in my peacemaking abilities during conflict.				
	P3 Intro All	P3 Intro Completers	P3 Closing All	P3 Closing Completers
Range	1–5	1–4	1–4	1–4
Median	3.5	3	4	4
Mean	3.4	3	3.54	3.56
Stand. Dev.	0.88	1	0.88	1.01
n	19	9	13	9

Table 1: Statistics on Prompts 1–3 Introductory and Closing Responses. Scale 1–5.

This focus group’s sample size is small by design, so I make no claim that these statistical outcomes are representative of a larger population or predictive of what would happen if my Bible study were conducted again. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the participants’ self-reported data affirms some benefits of the Bible study as a conflict transformation training experience. The data in Table 1 indicate participants’ self-report that they advanced as a group in

all three areas measured: their skills for navigating conflict (P1), their preparation to handle conflict with biblical principles (P2), and their confidence in their peacemaking abilities (P3). We can see this growth in the increase of the mean from introductory to closing responses in each respective column. The closing responses for P2 were the lowest means with the widest standard deviations, suggesting that even after the Bible study's completion, the participants still have room to grow into their newfound theological fluency. However, the median datapoints exhibit some increase as well in P2 and P3 for both the "Completers" and the "All" samples. Neither of these samples experienced a median increase for P1. The participants still need more confidence in their conflict transformation skills.

The "Completers" self-reported significantly more growth in all areas, especially in response to P2, in which their mean score moved from 2.25 to 3.38. I hoped that the mean might have reached up near to a score of 4. However, the fact that this did not happen is not too discouraging, given that the starting mean was so low. The range for the P3 responses of the "All" group decreased on its high band from 5 to 4. However, this decrease may be accounted for by the reduction in the sample size by six respondents in the closing session.

These statistics suggest that the Bible study encourages modest growth in participants' self-reported understanding of their conflict preparedness. Further research should refine these prompts in order to evaluate the four elements of conflict preparedness with greater specificity.

C.2 Qualitative Analysis of Prompts 4–6 in the Introductory and Closing Responses

The introductory responses to P4 in Table 2 include almost no words with positive associations. However, there is a positive development in the closing responses to P4 as seen in Table 3. Participants respond with far more words with positive or compassionate connotations,

such as “caring,” “compromise,” and “forgiveness” twice—and even the words “God,” “love,” and “peace.” The participants’ theological vocabulary for conflict has expanded!

anger (x10)	drama	impatience	slow it down!
avoid	emotional	make peace	stress (x2)
avoidance	empathy	misunderstanding (x2)	strong feelings
calm	fight (x2)	need	truth (x2)
compromise (x2)	fighting (x2)	negotiation	uncomfortable (x3)
difference of opinions	frustration (x2)	pride	unease
disagree (x2)	hard	sad	yelling
disagreement (x3)	hurt (x2)	selfishness	
distrust	ignore	slow	

P4: When I think of conflict, three words that come to mind are...

Table 2: Prompt 4 Introductory Responses

anger (x3)	misunderstanding (x2)
avoid	painful
caring	peace
compromise	regret
disagreement	relationship
forgiveness (x2)	sadness
God	stress
hatred	suffering
help me Lord	uncomfortable (x2)
humble	uneasy
hurt feelings	unhappiness
jabbing	why did you
love	win

P4: When I think of conflict, three words that come to mind are...

Table 3: Prompt 4 Closing Responses

In the introductory responses to P5 seen in Table 4, we find a range of responses that tend to cluster around five themes:

1. understanding the other
2. negotiating a compromise
3. “communication” or “talking” (3 respondents)
4. de-escalation (“calming down and thinking rationally,” “talking, taking time to cool off” and “time out then have calm, productive conversation”)
5. prayer (1 respondent).

avoiding	prayer
being open-minded	seeking to understand others' motivations and needs
better communication	talking (x2)
calming down and thinking rationally	thinking and praying before responding
communication (x3)	time out and then have calm, productive conversation
discuss both sides	time to cool off
explanation	understand the background of each person in conflict
listening	understanding
listening to the details that reflect the true issue,	understanding (both sides)
negotiation	working to reach a compromise
peaceful negotiation	
P5: I think most conflicts can be resolved by...	

Table 4: Prompt 5 Introductory Responses

While all these themes are valid, it is interesting that in the introductory session the theme of prayer was a lone theological cry in the wilderness. A shift occurs toward theological language in the closing P5 responses in Table 5:

being humble and forgive better communication compromise listening to the other party and find common ground maybe if the other person gives in mediation meeting in the middle owning the wrong and asking forgiveness people stop being so stubborn prayer prayer and encounter showing God's love trying to see other person's view
P5: I think most conflicts can be resolved by...

Table 5: Prompt 5 Closing Responses

The three themes that emerge from these responses in Table 5 are:

1. communication, though this time with the nuance of mutual understanding (“compromise,” “listening to the other party and find common ground,” “mediation,” “meeting in the middle,” and “trying to see other person’s view”)
2. the conflict transformation skills our group practiced during the five sessions (“encounter” and “owning the wrong and asking forgiveness,” this latter being very similar to centered speaking in session 4)
3. theological imagination (“being humble and forgive,” “prayer,” “prayer and encounter,” and “showing God’s love”).

The participants' vocabulary has shifted in their closing responses for P5. They can articulate with increased theological fluency because of the training.

One further improvement in the P5 prompt for future research might be to avoid a generalizing tone. Or if one wants to continue using P5 due to the way in which it picks up on how respondents make generalized judgments about conflict resolution, the researcher might develop an additional prompt that invites a negative reversal, "I think most conflicts cannot be resolved by...", or an additional prompt that invites the respondent to think of exceptions to their previous generalization, "One situation in which the resolution I proposed in P5 won't work is...".

In Table 6, we see three themes emerge from the participants' introductory responses to P6:

1. coercive speech (such as "arguing their point," "bullying their idea," "talking, yelling," "they don't or by raising voices," and "trying to make the other person agree with them")
2. intense emotions (such as "getting mad," "reacting emotionally to their needs and 'buttons,'" "screaming," and "raising voices")
3. avoidance behaviors (such as "avoiding the situation," "avoiding them," "ignoring the problem or quitting," and "separation").

The frustration implied in these responses is evident. The implication is that other people's attempts to resolve conflict are ineffective and ironically make the conflict worse. Our participating group of Christian leaders, like all human beings, have had highly disappointing experiences during conflict. However, there are some new developments in the closing responses to P6 as seen in Table 7.

arguing their point	have their own agenda and don't listen
arguments	ignoring
avoiding the situation	ignoring the problem or quitting
avoiding them	pre-judging
bullying their idea	reacting emotionally to their needs and "buttons"
communication, understanding, education	screaming
fighting back	separation
fighting until someone gives in	talking, yelling
getting mad	they don't or by raising voices
getting their way	trying to make the other person agree with them
P6: I think most people try to resolve their conflicts by...	

Table 6: Prompt 6 Introductory Responses

anger	mouth
avoidance	praying
avoiding it	right fighting
bullying (x2)	selfish means
fighting and not seeing both sides	showing they are stronger
forcing their opinion before negotiating	speaking up
forgiving and giving themselves time to get over it	understanding both sides
getting their way	
P6: I think most people try to resolve their conflicts by...	

Table 7: Prompt 6 Closing Responses

While there are responses in Table 7 similar to the introductory P6 responses from Table 6, empathic and theological terms now appear in Table 7, suggesting that our training changed participants' perceptions of how other people handle conflict. We see two empathic responses, "forgiving and giving themselves time to get over it," and "understanding both sides." Responses

from the introductory P6 such as “screaming” have transformed into more articulate and empathic language, “speaking up” and “right fighting.” There is even a theological response from a participant who sees other people “praying” to resolve their conflicts. This collection of closing P6 responses is a more balanced set, including both healthy and dysfunctional terms, compared to the terms from the introductory P6 responses, which all had to do with dysfunction. The participants increased their empathy toward other people in conflict, and there was a hint that their growing imaginative theological fluency was making a difference in how they speak about other people as well.

C.3 Qualitative Responses of Prompt 7 About Conflict in the Local Church

The responses to P7 (“When I think about conflict in my church, three words that come to mind are...”), were personal in nature and concerned with the inner workings of the participants’ own particular church. However, these responses were varied both in subject and in tone. As in the introductory responses to P4 (Table 2) the introductory P7 responses likewise contain a great deal of frustration, disappointment, and pain, as well as some objective descriptions of the participants’ experiences of conflict in the local church. However, in the closing P7 responses, a new vocabulary emerged from the three-word association prompt. Words like “miscommunication,” “agreement,” “normal,” and “limited” convey a sense that the Bible study helped participants look constructively at the conflict in their own church. But even more importantly, words that are empathic, relational, and theological emerged: “humans,” “forgiveness,” “caring,” “humble,” and “peaceful.” In the introductory responses, the group expressed frustrations with local church conflict without being able to articulate any good that derives from it. However, at the conclusion of the entire Bible study, some participants were able

to articulate the conflict in their local church with a greater measure of empathy and theological fluency. They could speak of the good produced by the rain from their own church's conflicts.

C.4 Conclusion: Prepared Leaders, Anchored Voices, Transformed Storms

In this appendix, I analyzed how the participating leaders' theological fluency and their sense of their own conflict preparedness developed during our training. There is evidence that the group began to transform deeply. It is important for a pastor engaging in local church conflict transformation to prepare leaders as the human contributors to their church's transformation. Prepared leaders can resist the stormy cycles of dysfunction in their church's intragroup conflicts as voices who anchor the pastor and their church with relational support. My analysis suggests that this Bible study cultivates participating leaders' empathy and theological fluency, so that they can be the anchoring voices their church needs. These leaders are now better prepared to be more theologically articulate and empathic during conflict in the local church—and perhaps during conflicts in other areas of their lives as well. Local church conflict is a storm of language and emotion, but leaders' language and empathy are transformed after encountering the Old Testament imaginatively. The leaders are better prepared to transform future relational storms in the church with the new imagination of their theological language and with the empathy of practical wisdom.

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