



# Shared Visions

*A publication to assist in the spiritual formation of lay volunteers  
presented by the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center ...  
...The people who bring you Connections*

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Volume Five, Number Two

Overview: Something is wrong. There is a tension in the air that you and your community just can't seem to shake. What can you do about it?

There are plenty of strategies to resolve conflict among groups. This issue of Shared Visions focuses on conflict situations within community and getting through them.

JVC Volunteer Phil Gallagher recounts the challenges surround-

ing his community's efforts to confront and assist one member through his problem and eventual decision to leave the program early. Phil takes us through their frustrations and growth.

Claire Preiscer, a former At-One-Ment Associate, tells of her community's struggles to understand and meet one another's needs, while tending to their own.

Reflection questions, personal reflection exercises, community discussion activities and biblical references included in this issue are designed to help your community bring to the surface and resolve certain conflicts that need attention.

## In This Issue:

- Methods for Resolving Conflicts within Community.
- Volunteers' personal stories.
- Reflection exercises and discussion questions.

## Stress, Struggle and Growth

*-Phil Gallagher  
JVC Volunteer*

As I started my first year as a volunteer, I eagerly looked forward to community living, a full year of getting to know and growing with my new community. I thought a lot about the concept of community life, and felt confident and ready for its various challenges and difficulties. It was only later that it became clear how much I underestimated the many challenges, as well as gifts that I would encounter in my community. Our most difficult problem was the mid-year departure of one community member.

Our community that year was composed of five eager first-year volunteers, whom I assumed were entering into this new venture with much the same expectations, capabilities, and forethought as I. As we began to get to know one another, we quickly learned how different we were. As we went through a great time of discovering one another, we also gradually realized that one of us had a problem with which we were simply incapable of dealing. Further, this problem severely limited his ability to be an active, trusting member of the

community which we were building.

Handling this difficult situation dominated the life of our community for four months. The rest of us met without him to discuss ways of handling the situation. In this phase we were greatly supported by friends outside the community who brought to us their experience with both community life and this type of problem. After much discussion among ourselves and more

## Not Always So Neat and Clean

*Claire Preiscer  
Former At-One-Ment Associate*

In 1992 and '93 I spent one year as an At-One-Ment Associate in Jamaica. I worked in various ministries there, and lived with three other volunteers. The four of us formed a great community (If I do say so myself!). We spent a great deal of time together - exploring Jamaica, sharing ourselves, and laughing. But we had our share of disagreements.

As volunteers in a different culture, our lives sometimes seemed to

be a series of mini-adventures. Going to the grocery store, taking a walk or a drive, having a conversation with the locals: these were all of a sudden interesting and unpredictable. For example, one of our first days on the island, a man came up to two of us and said, "I'm white." The man, in fact, was black and so we were both very confused. We mumbled something and smiled. He repeated himself several times, gave up and walked away. Only

experienced people, we decided to confront our housemate with our awareness of the situation, and encourage him to seek help for it. We had our intervention, which went successfully. He admitted his problem, and agreed to seek outside assistance.

Gradually, however, we began to doubt whether he kept his word and indeed sought this assistance. Many of the traits that limited his participation in community persisted. Once again, we had to have discussions without his participation. After three months of

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debate and doubt, we finally decided to ask him to leave. At the same time, to our surprise, he announced to us his own decision to leave.

This entire four-month process was extremely tiring and, in many ways, unhealthy. The community dynamic of four people talking about an absent fifth member can never grow into anything else, because it raises suspicions, guilt, and questions of trust and openness. At the same time, I do not see how it would have been possible for us to have reacted in any other way once we realized our limits and lack of ability to deal with his issue.

The most difficult part of this process was deciding how committed we were to having this individual remain in the community. After months of work, we realized that, despite all our efforts, this person remained unwilling (or unable) to be part of a community. The realization of our failure was what prompted us to ask him to leave. At that time, however, we were faced with inevitable second-guessing. Should we have realized the hopelessness of the situation months before and cut our losses then? On the other hand, could we have given more support to our (former) community member to encourage him to deal with his problem?

These questions came up at different points through the remainder of our year. I must admit that immediately following his departure, we felt little loss or remorse; we were all too tired and frustrated to think about that. Another problem reared its head at that point: none of us had looked ahead to the time after our community member left the house. Although our experience of working together to deal with this common problem had unified us into a tight group, the loss of our community member ended these circumstances and required us once more to deal with each other. For so long we had glossed over the more minor areas of friction that developed among the rest of us.

In many ways this period immediately after his departure was a difficult one. We no longer had a ready made topic for discussion and concern and we rediscovered all sorts of intra-commu-

nity difficulties that were previously concealed. I do not think that we were a strong community at that point; instead, we were scattered and self-centered. Our self-absorption was a result of our fatigue. We all felt that we had invested a large part of ourselves in working with this one community member, and this investment had not paid off. In reaction, for weeks we each focused inward and gave our individual selves the bulk of our attention and concern. We somehow felt that we had earned it. I was also hesitant to put more of myself into community building, for fear that it would prove fruitless once again.

Gradually, with some assistance from friends outside the house, we began to realize that we were neglecting our community life. We came to see, once again, that conflict within the house is not necessarily a bad thing, and we began to actively work with each other once again. This ultimate progress, however, occurred only after we actively decided to recommit ourselves to the community.

Unfortunately, the premature departure of community members will be a reality to many communities. This fact should really not be too surprising. I have found that people's most common reactions to community are: it allowed the individual to grow and learn in ways unanticipated, and this involved more work and difficulty than had been expected. For any undertaking requiring that much effort and dedication, there will be people, no matter how well intentioned, who are simply not prepared to sweat or for whom the rewards come only too late after the labors.

I still go back and forth in my mind, debating whether we should have asked my housemate to leave earlier. That would have given the rest of us the chance to move on that much earlier, to tire us out less, and to build up less bitterness. However, if we had let one go that easily, might we not have expected that much less of each other when difficult times inevitably arose later on? We also might have questioned our own compassion and commitment, because without trying, we would never have learned whether it was possible to help our former housemate.

## Model

*Conflict resolution is the act of turning each person's needs into a common goal.*

1. Choose among yourselves someone to speak for each person given the opportunity to speak.
2. Each person take a turn briefing the group.
3. Discuss expectations. Are everyone's needs being met?
4. Find some middle ground. Discuss the pros and cons of each person's needs.
5. Since forming community, work together to meet each other's needs.
6. Discuss and outline the goals of the community and make a contract that each person agrees to.
7. Begin every meeting from here.

Friends in the larger community greatly helped us through our difficult times. Especially to a house made up of people who were new to the rigors and processes of community life, I think these people were invaluable. They could ask questions from an impartial distance, because their personal involvement was not as intense as ours. Also, they had the benefit of many years of community life themselves, and their experience helped us to better understand what we were going through. I am very thankful that we realized our limits, our inability to handle things completely on our own, and that we sought this aid.

This period that I have described was at times very difficult and frustrating. However, it was only a single phase of our community life that year. As in any crisis situation, we learned a lot about each other. Also, we came to understand to a great extent how much we could depend on each other's time and caring. Ultimately, then, this situation, although painful, gave strength to our community and ultimately brought us closer together. +

# For Conflict Resolution in Community

ing "I win - you lose" battles into "We all win" situations. One key is compassion and care for  
s. Use the model below to assist your community in meeting everyone's needs.

neone to lead the meeting. The leader maintains order and ensures that each person is

explaining his/her expectations of living in community.

ryone's in sync? If not, what are the extremes?

Discuss realistic expectations that the entire group can agree upon.

What have you done to meet these expectations? What haven't you done?

of your community for the remainder of the year. Once the goals are agreed upon by all,  
son commits to fulfilling.

son by reading aloud the contract you've all committed to.

Not Always So Neat and Clean" continued from page 1.

later did we learn that to a Jamaican, his statement meant,  
"I'm Mr. White."

This interaction was typical of much of my time in  
Jamaica. So often I felt like I was just a beat behind - like I  
was never quite sure of what was happening. And I think it  
was this sense of being an outsider that brought our commu-  
nity together very quickly. Suddenly, although strangers a  
few weeks before, we were struggling together to figure out  
what was going on. The four of us - young, relatively  
privileged, from "first world" countries - were each other's  
support, understanding how strange, wonderful and sad it  
all was.

We were living in a middle-class Jamaican neighbor-  
hood, outside the capital. The bulk of our work was in  
nearby, poorer neighborhoods. Given this setting, it is  
ironic that one of our first conflicts was around cross-  
cultural issues within the community itself. After about two  
months, a woman in our community from Ireland called us  
together to explain that she really missed having people  
from home to hang out with. In a sense, she was going  
through two cross-cultural experiences - living in one  
different culture with people from yet another culture.

I wish the rest of us had sensed how she felt. But in  
the absence of such understanding, I'm glad she told us. We  
were more sensitive to her needs, and she to ours.

Other conflicts weren't so neat and clean. One revolved  
around our social lives and what we did outside of work. It  
was here that we discovered clear differences in our personali-  
ties. Some of us were introverts, others extroverts; some more  
serious, others more light-hearted. Of the four of us, only  
one was consistently up for going out and searching for fun.  
This became difficult. She would want us to go out with her.  
I was torn between my commitment to community, to pleasing  
everybody and my need to have time alone. I didn't expect to  
have a great social life in Jamaica. I expected and needed a lot  
of "down time" to process all that I was seeing and feeling.  
We simply coped differently.

It turned out that communicating and respecting each  
other's choices, as well as compromising - really do work. I  
think through casual conversation, all of us around the kitchen  
table, we tried to honestly say what we felt. I really needed to  
spend time at home writing letters, and I voiced that. We tried  
not to judge each other for what we needed to do. Sometimes  
we went out; sometimes we stayed in.

My year in Jamaica was wonderful, and my community  
there contributed so much to the experience. As I write this, I  
realize I can't write about certain issues, as I'm still not  
entirely clear how one or more of my community members  
really felt about them. I wish now that we had explored  
more, and consciously covered other issues.

At this point I am again encouraged to talk more  
honestly and listen more fully to those around me. The  
benefits in doing so far outweigh the risks. +

## What happens to you?

99.9% of all communities experience conflict. As uncomfortable as it may be, it is a natural stage of community growth. If handled properly, conflicts are a healthy process of community living. Some communities have trouble getting through conflicts for one reason or another. Use the following exercise to help you see how each person in the community reacts to and handles conflict situations.

1. Individually, circle the words that best describe you and the way you deal with conflict. Take your time and be as honest with yourself as you can.

aggressive	spontaneous	strategizing
anxious	external (bounce things off others)	patient
assertive	nervous	stick to the issue at hand
go off about other issues	internal (try to figure out things alone)	defensive
angry	withdraw	make big deal over "little things"
hint at the issue	confrontational	get off the subject

2. Now come together as a group and take turns sharing your styles. As you get to know each other's manners of handling conflict, begin discussing strategies for your community to use in dealing with the next conflict that arises.

## Volunteer Life and the Dating Scene

Dating is not an uncommon phenomenon among volunteers. But it can often cause stress and tension for the community for one reason or another. Whether you are dating or not, take some time to answer the following questions below. Pinpoint from where the tensions are coming.

- What are your expectations of community living? Are these expectations being met? If not, why not?
- If you are dating someone, do you feel you are participating in community building as much as everyone else? Do you sense that others in the community do not agree with you? How should you address this?
- If you are not dating, but others in your community are, what concerns do you have about those in your community who are dating? When you look at things from their point of view, what do you see?

Many times tension builds simply because no one is comfortable bringing up this delicate subject. If things need to be said, if this is happening in your community, take the time to clear the air now. Use the conflict resolution model on page three as a guide for discussion.

## WORKSHEET QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. Every community faces problems. Phil's most difficult was the mid-year departure of one community member. In your opinion, what are two of your community's most difficult problems?

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2. How was conflict resolved in your family? How do you and your community address issues of conflict and tension? What similarities do you see? What differences do you see?

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3. Once things were resolved and the troubled individual left, Phil and his other community members found that there were many neglected issues under the surface that needed attention. What issues do you and your community need to address?

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4. What are some ways your faith influences how you resolve conflicts? For example, to what extent do prayer, scripture, sacrifice, love or forgiveness play a role in how you approach conflict?

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5. Think back to some experiences that may have brought your community together in the beginning. Briefly recount one or two.

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6. Claire and her community discovered differing needs with regard to their social lives. What are two of your needs that may be different from others?

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7. Honesty seemed to be a common cure for resolving tensions in Claire's community. Use a journal or a private space to be completely honest, to say something you haven't said to someone, to get something off your chest. Now challenge yourself and consider sharing what you've written.

# A Biblical Reflection

Consider the following conflicts in the gospels, or others with which you are familiar. What are some of the characteristics of how Jesus approaches the problem?

First example: Jesus seeks to stop the men who are stoning the woman who was accused as a sinner (John 8: 1-11). What does Jesus do?

Second example: Disciples are arguing about which among them is the greatest and Jesus encourages them to take a new approach (Matthew 18: 1-5). What is it?

In both of these conflict cases, Jesus invites the people in the conflict to "pass over" into a new point of view. For each of these conflicts, into whose life does Jesus ask them to pass over?

How does this "pass over" approach of Jesus, compare with the experiences of Phil and Claire? How could this type of empathy help in resolving a conflict in your community or workplace?

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### The mission of the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center:

To promote lay volunteer service that challenges the laity, clergy, and religious to work together in the mission of the Church. Our goal is to support lay volunteers *before, during and after* their term of service. Local Pallotti Centers are located in Boston, Memphis, Paterson, Saint Louis and Sacramento. The National Office is in Washington, DC.

The Centers take their inspiration from Saint Vincent Pallotti (1795-1850) who believed passionately in the laity, in each person as being an image of God and as called to be missionary.

*Shared Visions' goal is to explore five building blocks of spiritual development: Intellectual Growth, Emotional and Physical Health, Leadership and Prayer.*



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