

CHURCH IS LIKE FAMILY?

Systems Theory in Church and Organizational Interventions

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We're all familiar with the use of the family as a metaphor for church congregations. There are even hymns and spiritual songs that extol the virtues of "the family of God". It's interesting to note that the family metaphor is used much less often than other metaphors for the body of believers in scripture. Nonetheless, many churches and Christian organizations I've worked with do look like families. Unfortunately, **they look like many of the dysfunctional families I've worked with in therapy**. Here are some examples:

In a local church, the pastor of 20 years is no longer taking cues from the elder who was his father figure, mentor and strongest supporter for much of his early ministry. Now, the elder is part of a group who maintain "the problem" causing their recent downturn in church growth is the poor leadership of the pastor.

A troublesome member of a missionary team is sent home early for furlough and he and his wife have been instructed to see a counselor and work out their individual "problems" that have been identified as the "root of all evil" on the compound.

In another local church, the senior pastor and worship minister are at odds about the style of worship the church should use and other matters of leadership. As the relationship continues to deteriorate, staff dynamics have been affected, factions have begun to form in the congregation and their ministry is at a standstill. One staff member states, **"When mom and dad are fighting, all of us kids retreat to our rooms"**.

In our practice, we have found the concepts in systems theory and family therapy quite useful in helping congregations work through their community issues. We have taken training at the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center in Lombard, Illinois, and also with Lutheran Minister Peter Steinke, author of the book and workshop titled Healthy Congregations. Both of these folks take their cues from the work of Rabbi Edwin Friedman, who devoted much of his later life to applying the family systems theories of Murray Bowen to congregational life. His book *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* is not only an excellent introduction to family systems and systems thinking, but a helpful adaptation of those concepts to church life.

Many of the concepts of systems theory are relevant to congregational life. Some of the key helpful concepts include: anxiety, homeostasis, identified patient (scapegoat), self-differentiation and

triangulation. **In times of stress, conflict, challenge and change, church families act as predictably as nuclear families do.** And the degree of collective emotional and spiritual maturity in a church family is a significant variable in how well the congregation weathers such times. The perceived threat of conflict or change causes significant anxiety in church systems. As anxious members of our congregational families begin to emotionally fuse with one another, anxious coalitions begin to form. If these anxious people are attended to too much, the anxiety becomes contagious. This collective anxiety drives members to more primitive forms of coping. They become like the Apostle Paul, when he says, "...what I will to do (higher brain response), that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do (primitive reaction)."

One such form of coping that is common in dysfunctional families and conflicted congregations is the establishing of an identified patient or scapegoat. The scapegoat is an apt religious metaphor. If we can identify that one person to blame, or that one family, or that one segment of our community who is "the problem", we can heap all of our sins on the back of that goat, send it out of our camp as a sacrifice for all - then we will all feel better and everything will go back to normal. Of course, as we all know from our experience with dysfunctional families, if the scapegoat actually does leave the camp, the problems resume sooner or later, and - unless something alters the dynamics of the system - another scapegoat is soon chosen. One church I have worked with has had no pastor last longer than 2 years over the past three decades.

Our point of entry into the congregational or church organization system is most often through the scapegoat. A "fallen " or disgruntled or burned out pastor is referred to us "to be made whole again". Yet worse, he/she comes to us in the crisis of transition after becoming the "lightening rod" for the congregation's struggles, then "let go" - the ultimate sacrifice. A missionary, such as the one above, is sent home to "get straightened out" because he/she is seen as "the problem" with team dynamics. Or, we are called in to mediate in a congregation or ministry group whose collective anxiety has caused them to polarize into two camps, each one scapegoating the other. As Friedman says, "we need a common enemy, so that we might become more civil to one another."

In the case of the individual scapegoat, our first job is to help him/her "separate the wheat from the chaff"; that is, take ownership of the legitimate, substantive issues that really do need to be personally addressed and let go of the other "sins" that have been heaped upon them. This is a crucial task of self-differentiation. We certainly do want to help ministers and missionaries work through their own developmental issues and grow in their spiritual and emotional formation. We quote Bowen to them, "The best way to change a dysfunctional emotional system is to start with one's own function in it". But, as it is with the adolescent who gets put in treatment by his parents, or the alcoholic who is in recovery, we know that it is likely that lasting change will not happen unless we address the whole family system.

In the event the church family is open to the return of the identified patient, there is the work of education to be done with leaders of the community. **Our goal is to find the more mature, self-differentiated leaders in the congregation and empower them to make change.** We say to them, "What is it about your particular 'family' that has provided the context for this to happen." "What needs to be changed in the system for this not to happen again?" If congregations, or leaders of them, are

willing to look at the nature of their system, we are often able to help them toward emotional maturity - or help them make necessary adjustments to their structure to address their systems issues.

In one successful case - the missionary couple sent home, mentioned above - I was able not only to help the couple address some particular issues of development and trauma that had contributed to their decompensating under stress, but also was able to help their compound leader see other dynamics that had contributed to team disharmony. Over a several-month process of long e-mail exchanges and a few long-distance phone calls, I was able to help him see how the team had collectively invested in blaming this one couple for many problems they had little to do with, and how he - as team leader - was unconsciously quite willing to facilitate this process, since he was threatened by the competence and forthrightness of my clients. As this team leader began to distinguish his own issues with my clients from dynamics on the team, he was less able to see this couple as "the root of all evil" on their team. He even quoted Pogo to me, "We have seen the enemy and he is us!"

In the case of polarized congregations, our task is to join the congregational family without joining the conflict and act as a "non-anxious presence" amongst the collective anxiety. We encourage everyone who has an interest to speak and promote interest-based instead of position-based negotiations. We also refuse to participate in triangulation or unhealthy coalition building and point out when it is happening. As with families in therapy, after every one's concerns are heard, we look to addressing the interests of all and adapting the system to accommodate those interests.

Model for Healthy Church Families

There are many models in systems theory that are adaptable to helping church families become healthier. One of the more helpful models I've used comes from William Shutz's FIRO (Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation) Theory. For those unfamiliar with it, the theory attempts to assess family dynamics from the perspectives of inclusion (belonging), control (power, empowerment) and affection (mutuality, trust, intimacy). Shutz believed that the more couples, families, or teams felt a sense of belonging, empowerment and trust, the better they would feel about being together and the better they would perform. He also suggested there is an optimal sequence in how these three elements come about in families or groups. **Specifically, issues of inclusion take precedence over issues of control, which in turn take precedence over issues of intimacy.** Another way of saying this is that a family (including church family) will feel close and trusting of one another only to the degree they have a sense of mutual empowerment, and each member will feel empowered only to the degree that he/she feels as though they belong in the family. I have often used this model in therapy to help stepfamilies in transition see that they must be intentional about belonging together before each member will feel empowered in and trusting of the new family configuration.

A neat thing about the concepts of FIRO theory is that there are Biblical parallels to them. Perhaps the most direct parallel is found in the I Corinthians 12 & 13 of the New Testament. Paul is addressing conflict in the church about whose gifts are more important, which ones should be used, how they should be used, etc. Smack dab in the middle of his discourse about gifts, he takes time to point out that

all parts belong to the body, that each part is vital and that we have to understand that in order to love and trust one another. He seems to be saying, "you have to have these things in order before you can address your conflict about the gifts." One of our interventions in anxious, divided and blaming congregations has been to draw their attention to each member's need to feel like they belong, to feel as though their opinion or contribution is important and to feel cared for by the community, even when we disagree about issues. It is possible for church families to work through conflicts more effectively when these elements are in place.

Is church like family? Well, when things are uncomfortable in my congregation, it's interesting to note how many of the latent feelings from issues in my own family of origin are triggered. And, **unchecked, I am likely to act toward my fellow parishioners the way I acted when there was conflict in my family or origin.** This is why I strive to continue to grow in spiritual and emotional maturity, to be able to distinguish my own issues from those in my congregation and to be more objective about what happens in our church. It is my privilege to have the opportunity to help others do the same.

This article was originally written for the Summer 2001 Newsletter of the Minnesota Association for Marriage and Family Therapy and may be reprinted for personal use. Patrick Repp, MA, LP, LMFT, is the founder and director of Minnesota Renewal Center, an interdenominational ministry of support, counseling and consultation to ministers, missionaries and churches. He can be contacted through the ministry website at: www.minnesotarenewal.org, or by email at pjr@minnesotarenewal.org.