

LEADERSHIP OF A CONGREGATIONAL SYSTEM

Definition of Self-Differentiated Leader

“... someone who is less likely to become lost in the anxious emotional processes swirling about . . . who can separate while still remaining connected, and, therefore, can remain a modifying, non-anxious, and sometimes challenging presence . . . who can manage his or her own reactivity of others, and, therefore, be able to take stands at the risk of displeasing. It is not as though some leaders can do this and some cannot. No one does this easily, and most leaders, I have learned, can improve their capacity.”

—Edwin Friedman in *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*

What is “systems thinking”?

“Systems thinking” is an approach to organizational life (and all of life) that sees everything as interrelated, in relationship to and with other elements in “the system,” that is, the totality of elements and relationships inside and outside an organization or a situation. This way of thinking is often contrasted with a way of thinking that emphasizes the separate parts of an organization or a problem being analyzed. In contrast to “separate parts thinking,” systems thinking focuses on how the element of a system being studied interacts with the other constituents or elements of the system of which it is a part. This means that instead of isolating smaller and smaller parts of the system being studied, systems thinking works by expanding its view to take into account larger and larger numbers of interactions.

Peter Steinke in his book *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* contrasts these two approaches in this way:

Separate Parts Thinking	Systems Thinking
Atomistic	Holistic
Problems belong to the individual	Problems belong to the system
Problems are intra (within a part)	Problems are inter (between parts)
Whole can be understood by reduction into parts	Whole can be understood by interaction of the parts
Parts explain the whole	Whole explains the parts
Understanding comes from breaking whole down into smaller and smaller pieces	Understanding comes from looking up (larger and larger wholes)
Parts can be understood in themselves	Parts mutually influence one another
Think in lines	Think in loops
Cause and effect thinking	Co-causal

FIGURE 2-5: SEPARATE PARTS VS. SYSTEMS THINKING

Family Systems and Congregational Leadership

Dr. Murray Bowen, a psychiatrist, originated family systems theory and identified interlocking concepts that were important in the family systems he worked with and observed. This was a different paradigm of human dynamics, contrasting with “personality theory,” which tended to focus on individuals as those who had certain fixed traits and tendencies.

Rabbi Edwin Friedman and others then built on some of these theories and applied them to religious and organizational systems. Lutheran pastor Peter Steinke popularized these theories in a series of books on congregations as systems and the role of leadership within congregations in creating and maintaining congregational health.

These thinkers developed and/or described several important background concepts and assumptions relevant to our study of congregational systems:

Emotional fields and the important position of leaders: A field is a region of influence, an environment created when one thing affects another thing, “an invisible force of influence.” A field comes into being when one piece of matter draws near another. In human interactions, when people come together, they begin to function as they do because they are in the presence of one another. Within the concept of emotional fields, *the position* someone occupies in the field comes to be very important. Because of a leader’s position, he or she affects the emotional field and, therefore, the whole system more than anyone else. This means that the leader has tremendous potential to evoke a healthy response in a system when it is in distress. For instance, as Steinke writes in *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*,

- When the system is in crisis, the leader can bring calm
- When the system is bewildered, the leader can bring focus
- When the system is stagnant, the leader can bring challenge
- When new situations arise that need new responses, the leader can bring change

Chronic anxiety: According to Bowen and others, all emotional systems contain free-floating anxiety. “While specific events or issues are often the principal generators of acute anxiety, the principal generators of chronic anxiety are people’s reactions to a disturbance in the balance of a relationship system” (Kerr & Bowen). Anxiety is an organism’s response to a real or imagined threat. Bowen presumed that all living things experience anxiety in some form. He used the term interchangeably with emotional reactivity. Both terms indicate an increase in physical manifestations, such as heart rate and blood pressure changes, gaze aversion, fight or flight responses, and heightened alertness or fear sensations.

Basic life forces—closeness and distancing: The theory postulates “two opposing basic life forces. One is a built-in life growth force toward individuality and the differentiation of a separate self, and the other an equally intense emotional closeness.” (Bowen) Bowen defined two life forces at work in human relationship systems, togetherness and individuality. The togetherness force entails the pressure and desire to be like others, to agree on beliefs, principles, values, and feelings. The individuality force, also termed the differentiating force, involves the impetus to define a separate self from others. Bowen viewed the differentiating force as responsible for self without making demands on others or blaming others. A person who is self-defined takes action based on well-thought-out principles when working with an emotional system.

According to Bowen, “the togetherness force assumes responsibility for the happiness, comfort, and well-being of others” while a person differentiating a self “assumes responsibility for one’s own happiness and comfort and well-being.”

Triangles: Triangles are the basic molecule of human relationship systems. A two-person dyad becomes unstable once anxiety increases. Then, one or both members of the dyad usually pull in a third person to relieve some of the pressure. In a three-person system, anxiety has more places to go, and the relationship where the anxiety originated experiences some relief. When the three-person system can no longer contain the anxiety, it involves more people and forms a series of interlocking triangles. Bowen researchers consider triangles a natural function of living systems. Triangles can have either negative or positive outcomes depending on how their members manage anxiety and reactivity. Bowen postulated that if one member of the triangle remains calm and in emotional contact with the other two, the system automatically calms down. On the other hand, with enough stress and reactivity, members lock into a triangular position, which negatively affects all three parties, particularly the one who for the moment is “triangled out.”

Differentiation of self: According to Bowen, families and other social groups deeply affect how people think, feel, and act, but individuals vary in their susceptibility to “group think” and groups vary in the amount of pressure they exert for conformity. These differences between individuals and between groups reflect differences in people’s levels of differentiation of self. The less developed a person’s “self,” the more impact others have on his or her functioning and the more he or she tries to control, actively or passively, the functioning of others. The basic building blocks of a “self” are inborn, but an individual’s family relationships during childhood and adolescence primarily determine how much “self” he or she develops. Bowen believed that once established, the level of “self” rarely changes unless a person makes a structured and long-term effort to change it.

People with a poorly differentiated “self” depend so heavily on the acceptance and approval of others that either they quickly adjust what they think, say, and do to please others or they dogmatically proclaim what others should be like and pressure them

to conform. Bullies depend on approval and acceptance as much as chameleons, but bullies push others to agree with them rather than their agreeing with others. Disagreement threatens a bully as much as it threatens a chameleon. An extreme rebel is a poorly differentiated person too, but he or she pretends to be a “self” by routinely opposing the positions of others.

People with a well-differentiated “self” recognize their realistic dependence on others, but they can stay calm and clear headed enough in the face of conflict, criticism, and rejection to distinguish thinking rooted in a careful assessment of the facts from thinking clouded by emotional reactivity. Thoughtfully acquired principles help guide decision making about important family and social issues, making them less at the mercy of the feelings of the moment. What they decide and what they say matches what they do. They can act selflessly, but their acting in the best interests of the group is a thoughtful choice, not a response to relationship pressures. Confident in their thinking, they can either support another’s view without being a disciple or reject another view without polarizing the differences. They define themselves without being pushy and deal with pressure to yield without being wishy-washy.

Self-Differentiated Leadership

The idea of self-differentiated leadership draws on many of the pieces of Bowen’s theories. Accordingly, self-differentiation as a leader does not mean being autonomous, cut off, separate, or independent of others in the system in which one is a leader. Rather, the leader needs to be himself or herself *and* remain part of and connected to the system. This is not necessarily easy. The task is to be connected to and with people in the system but not condition one’s emotions on them. Another way of saying this is that cutting oneself off from others doesn’t show a lack of emotion but instead both too much emotion and an inability to cope with that intensity of emotion.

One of the most important facets of congregational leadership, then, is the ability *not* to become

emotionally entangled in a congregation's anxious responses. This means that leaders must understand the dramatic effect of emotions and anxiety in organizational systems. This also requires that leaders be able to overcome their own anxious reactivity through self-regulation and “stay the course” even in the most highly anxious situations.

Thus, self-differentiated leadership involves cultivating a **self-regulated, non-reactive, non-anxious presence** that

- **stays connected to others**, that is, is able to resist the impulse to cut oneself off physically and emotionally, and is able to be present to and listen to people and the system as a whole;
- **sets direction**, that is, is able to take clearly conceived and defined positions that create, where appropriate, movement of the system to greater health, faithfulness, and effectiveness; is able to be a “self” or an “I” in the face of pressure by others or by the system to be part of, or blend into, the “we”; is able to know one's opinion, stand, or stance without imposing expectations or demands on others; is able to state clearly and calmly one's position without suggesting (with “must,” “should,” or “ought” language) that others need to have the same position; and
- **manages resistance and sabotage**, that is, without retribution, rigidity, dogmatism, cut-off, or withdrawal, is able to stay the course in the face of the natural human tendency to resist change and the inevitable emergence of sabotage in a changing system.

Understanding What Triggers Anxiety in a Congregation

Peter Steinke's list of what triggers anxiety in congregations (from Steinke's *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*) is a helpful reference for congregational leaders as they try to make sense of what is going on in their congregations at a given time:

- Money—raising it, spending it, and managing it when there isn't enough
- Sex and sexuality—sexual identity and expression issues, differences around this issue
- Pastor's leadership style—just “not liking” the pastor or a mismatch between the pastor's style and the leadership needed at a given time
- Lay leadership style—from overly passive to overly controlling
- Growth and survival—slow or rapid growth, survival issues
- Boundaries—people overstepping their authority, misuse of funds
- Trauma and/or transition—a key damaging event or significant transition
- Staff conflict and resignation
- Harm done to a child or the death of a child
- Old and new—a change like a new hymnal or a new worship time
- Contemporary and traditional worship—when style of worship elicits strong emotional response
- Gap between ideal and real—when lofty ideals are betrayed by reality
- Building construction, space, and territory—anything connected to space!

Dealing with Triangles

Congregational leaders often (some might say daily) have to work out how to deal with the many interlocking triangles that emerge in congregational life. Here are some basic triangles that are present in congregations and take active management. You can supply many more!

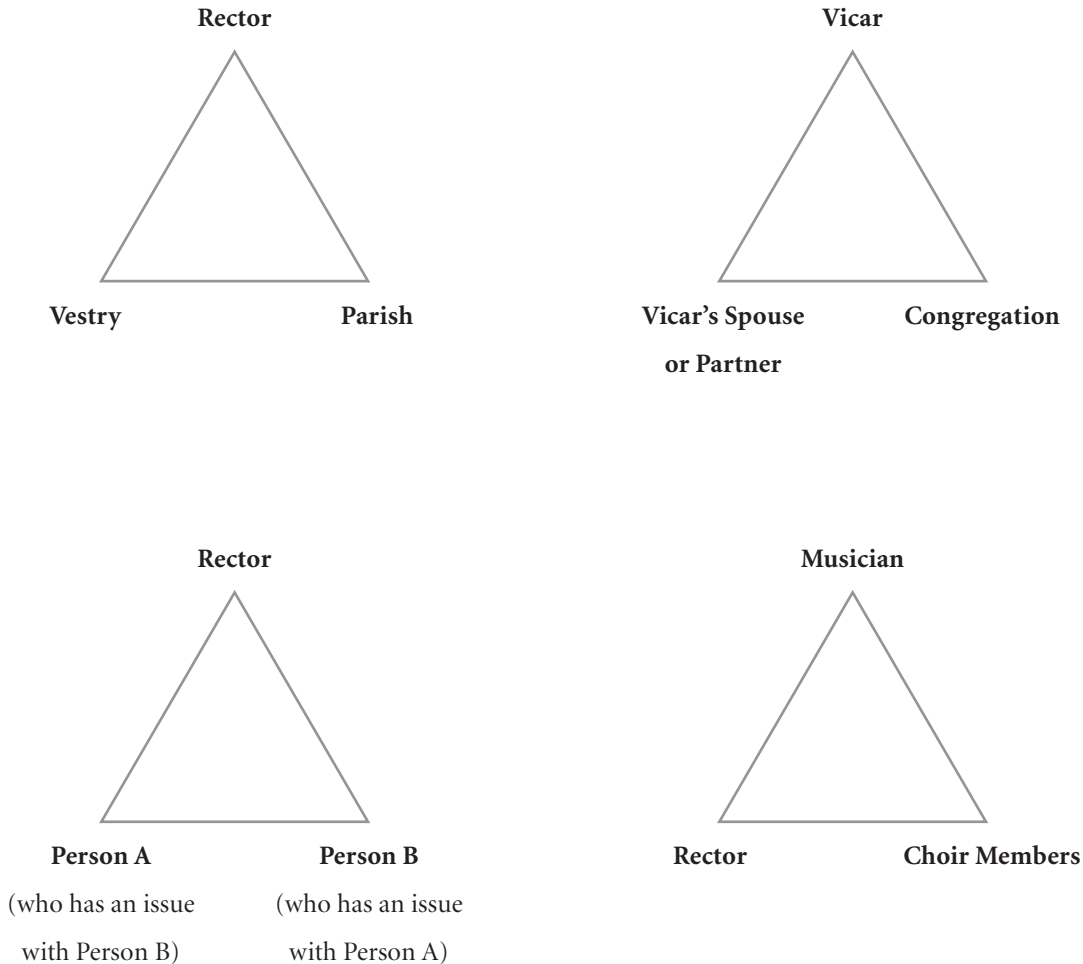


FIGURE 2-6: EXAMPLES OF TRIANGLES

As you deal with triangles, consider these tips:

- *Remember triangles are normal*—they are often a function of general anxiety in a system as well as the universal struggle people have with managing their closeness and separateness with one another (including you) and the anxiety that emerges as they try to navigate this. There will always be triangles!
- *Learn to recognize triangles* and try, where possible, to understand the emotional issues that are driving them.
- *Notice your own impulse to triangulate*, that is, not deal directly with someone with whom you have an issue. If you notice yourself chronically doing this, reflect on (or seek help about) these questions: What are the issues I have in relationship to this person or these people? How can I figure out a way to communicate more directly here?

- Where appropriate, consider “repositioning” yourself in a triangle—Person A comes to you about an issue with Person B. You let Person A know that you believe it’s best for Person A to work this out on his/her own with Person B. You take on a role of helping Person A to learn more about himself/herself in this and coach Person A about how he/she might approach Person B.
- Where appropriate, consider “collapsing” the triangle—you hear from someone that Person A has an issue with you and you go to Person A and say, “I’ve heard you’re troubled about _____. Can you tell me more about this?” Or you hear from Person A about his/her issue with Person B (and likewise) and you offer to sponsor a conversation between the two (this can be tricky).
- *Work on yourself* in terms of your ability to set a tone and an environment in which people feel safe to come to you about issues they may have with you.
- *Set norms in the whole system* about direct communication with the person or group someone has an issue with (or praise for).
- *Set into motion processes that allow the collective voice to speak and be listened to* so that people have a constructive means to gain clarity about where the bulk of the congregation and the leadership are on an issue or where things stand in the midst of a process. This can relieve tensions and anxiety and lessen the need to triangulate around an issue.

Out of a stance of self-regulated, non-reactive, non-anxious presence, a leader focuses on:

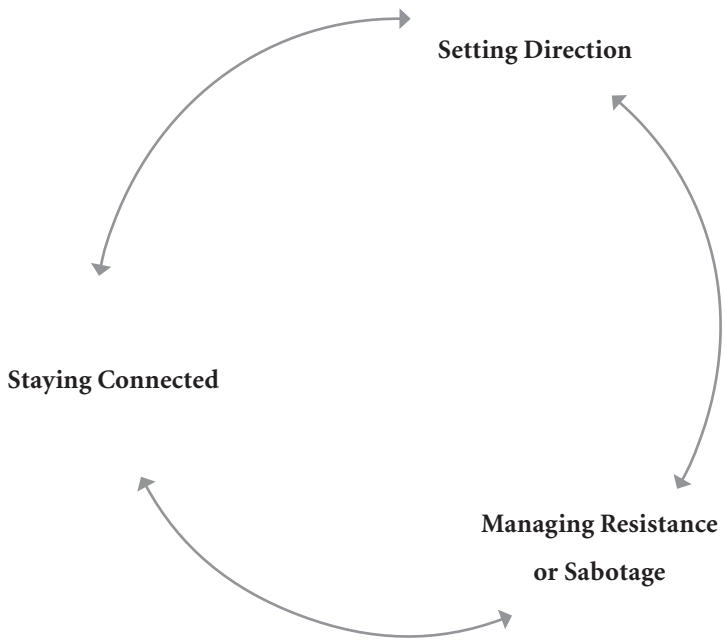


FIGURE 2-7: SELF-DIFFERENTIATED LEADERSHIP MODEL

20 OBSERVATIONS ABOUT TROUBLED CONGREGATIONS

From the *Alban Weekly* – Week of 12/4/2006

By Peter L. Steinke

I have worked with troubled churches for 20 years. I never cease to learn from these experiences. The list below includes some of what I have learned about congregations in times of conflict.

1. Most people are interested in relieving their own anxiety rather than managing the crisis or planning for a clear direction. Their primary goal is anxiety reduction, not congregational renewal.
2. Under certain conditions, anxiety is neutral. As much as possible, effective leaders normalize anxiety. Considering what is happening, anxiety's presence is what we would expect. By normalizing, people will not automatically think anxiety exists because the community is flawed.
3. If anxiety is high, people lose their capacity to be self-reflective. They look outward, not at themselves. Self-awareness is dim, and the ability to identify with the life processes of others is impaired.
4. Peace is often preferred over justice. Congregational members can resist or be hesitant about taking stands, making decisions, or charting a course of action that would offend or upset the community. By placing a premium on togetherness, they play into the hands of the most dependent people who can threaten to incite disharmony as a way to receive what they want. When such superficial harmony—so-called “peace”—must prevail, then the pursuit of justice often is sacrificed and others who are involved become excused from responsibility.
5. If an individual becomes the lightning rod for people's anxiety and cannot extricate him- or herself from that position through self-differentiation (or the environment is so perverse that no one can escape from that position), trying to maintain his or her position or presence in the emotional system is unproductive as well as painful.
6. All disease processes are enabled. Viruses need host cells. Not all people designated by anxious systems as the patient are sick. The illness is in the interactive system, to which the following observations attest:
“All neuroses have accomplices” (Carl Jung).
Anxiety not resolved in one relationship will be acted out in another relationship.
“Unless the leader has a degree of self-knowledge and self-understanding, there is the risk that he or she may use the organization to address his or her own neuroses” (Peter Senge et al.).
7. The way we use information is an emotional phenomenon; what we hear and don't hear, what we remember, how we gather and exclude data are all connected to emotional processes. We gravitate toward information that coincides with our viewpoints and that promises to contribute to our survival.
8. The healing process for midrange to severely anxious congregations takes two to five years.
9. Losses (membership, offerings, attendance) will result no matter what choices are made. Most congregations regain their losses within two years.
10. Secrets—that is, hidden agendas and invisible loyalties—in most cases need to be brought to light. What about sin and evil? Expect it; expose it. To expose the demonic, name it (recall the story of Jesus and the demoniac in Mark 5).
11. Reactivity can issue from people who are leaders, erudite, talented, wealthy, well-educated, pious, charming, or normally calm folks. None of the above characteristics indicate that these individuals are mature emotionally.

12. Issues must be clearly identified and individuals must be challenged to act. No anxious congregation can handle more than three to five issues at a time. The issues must be condensed.
13. The sabotage of a process to deal with conflict should be expected. The usual saboteurs will be those who are losing control or not getting what they want from the process.
14. Murray Bowen claimed that all dyads are unstable. Therefore the basic molecule of all relationship systems is a triangle (the use of a third party to reduce tension between a twosome). A Swahili proverb reads: “When the elephants fight, it’s the grass that gets crushed.” Triangle formation is natural. Triangulation is another matter. It happens when the third party allows the original dyad to escape responsibility for its actions by assuming their anxiety and taking responsibility for them. Whenever a congregation brings in a third party, such as an intervention team, there is a triangle. Triangulation would occur if the team became anxious and felt responsible for the conflict’s outcome.
15. Five styles of managing conflict have become commonplace: accommodating, problem solving, compromising, avoiding, and fighting. They are useful for recognizing general patterns of behavior under pressure. But they are not helpful when used as predictors—“Oh, Susan never takes a stand. She’ll compromise on anything.” People like Susan do not function in the same way in every context. At home Susan may compromise but at work she’s quite a problem solver. Even in the same conflict, people may shift from one style to another. One may begin as a fighter, only with time to become an accommodator. Further, not all avoiders or problem solvers are equal. There’s a range to their functioning. People’s functioning is not determined by a style but by the context.
16. Recent research challenges the prevailing assumptions about conflict behavior being mutually exclusive. For example, direct fighting and problem solving are more effective in combination than they are in isolation. The continuous repetition of fighting, then problem solving, and then fighting is effective.
17. How the conflict is framed affects the behavior of those involved. When the conflict is conceptualized as cost or benefit, the participants’ behavior changes. People become more involved if they anticipate losses as a result of the conflict than if they anticipate gains. Losses arouse greater emotional force. Researchers found that a prospect of loss led to less yielding behavior. Even when the opponent is about to suffer a loss, there is more cooperation from the other side than if the opponent enjoyed a profit.
18. No emotional system will change unless the members of the system change how they interact with one another. Patterns of behavior tend toward rigidity. Conflict may be necessary to jolt and jar the shape of things in order to reshape the pattern. But the degree to which that change is positive or negative depends on the leadership present to respond to it.
19. The parties involved in a rift are in a poor position to settle the dispute if anxiety is high and rampant. Being too closely and emotionally involved in a circumstance, they will find it difficult to provide a fair overview.
20. Final or perfect solutions are not available. Conflict leaves things messy. The best solutions to insolvable problems are the approximate solutions—ones that prepare a system for a new learning and a new beginning.

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