Family Systems Theory: The Congregation as a System 
Resource Section

Purpose:

To help participants use family systems theory as one way to look at and understand congregational dynamics. By looking at a congregation (or other systems such as vestries, dioceses, or committees) systemically, participants can more easily recognize connections between people and understand the effect those relationships can have on group function.

Theological Understanding:

St. Paul uses the image of the human body as a metaphor for the Body of Christ - the Church - to show an essential relationship among different parts. Just as the hand needs the eye, and the foot needs the leg, individuals in the Church need each other to be effective in ministry. He acknowledges the connections between the parts, and puts forth a model for how the Church can work to strengthen itself through its most essential vehicle – the community.

Special Instructions:

If your participants are well-versed in family systems theory, you may want to substitute one of the recommended videos and/or an analysis of one of Friedman’s Fables (see resources below) for the more basic introductory slides. Or you could use these resources in a second module if you want a more extended discussion. You may want a mobile as a prop for the discussion of the interrelationships within a system.

For mixed clergy/lay sessions, the small group discussions could take place in congregational teams with the individuals sharing their understandings of the congregation’s system.
Related Modules:

Leadership for Our Times
Power, Authority, and Influence
Entering a New System

Bibliography:


Friedman, Edwin H. Friedman's Fables. New York, NY, The Guildford Press, 1990 – a collection of short fables which, when used with the accompanying discussion guide, can illustrate family systems theory effectively; “The Bridge” is a favorite fable to use with Fresh Start groups (page 9).


_______________. (edited by Edward W. Beal and Margaret M. Treadwell) A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix. Bethesda, MD, The Edwin Friedman Estate/Trust, 1999 – an edited manuscript of Friedman’s thoughts and conclusions about the importance of leadership in today’s world; written by Friedman and published by his Estate after his death.


_______________. and Gerson, Randy. Genograms in Family Assessment. New York, NY, W.W. Norton and Company, 1985 – how genograms (family diagrams) can be used to analyze and see deeper into issues of family and other systems.

Steinke, Peter L. Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What. Herndon, VA, The Alban Institute, 2006 – using family systems theory, Steinke outlines the leader’s role given the situations of our times and provides questions for further exploring the situation facing congregational leaders.

________________. Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach. Herndon, VA, The Alban Institute, 1996 – a follow-up to How Your Church Family Works (below), this publication explores more deeply the congregation as an emotional system and how congregations can improve health by dealing with stress and anxiety.


Resources:

Reinventing Leadership, a DVD by Edwin H. Friedman; available through www.guilford.com; includes a study guide. This resource, while dated (1996), is very popular with Fresh Start groups. Please note that the examples of leadership are all white men, and the video should be used with caution in multicultural groups. This presentation distills the ideas and insights offered in the late Dr. Friedman’s workshops on leadership and includes insights into why systems become “stuck,” who makes change happen, and how.

The Balancing Act: The Congregation as Emotional System, a DVD video presentation based on Healthy Congregations by Peter L. Steinke; available through Seraphim Communications (http://store.seracom.com); Steinke introduces the concept of the congregation as an emotional system; called a “how to see” rather than a “how to” presentation; those who use systems theory as a way of understanding organizations will see the powerful role of maturity in leaders when building healthy congregations.
General Outline of Session

1. Opening prayer/meditation (suggested reading: I Corinthians 12:12-26)

2. Check-in

3. Introduction and overview of Family Systems Theory as a lens for looking at congregational functioning. (PowerPoint 1, Talking Points)

4. What is a system? (PowerPoint 2-4, Talking Points)

5. Using Family Systems Theory as a way of better understanding the function of a congregational system (PowerPoint 5 - 6, Talking Points Handout 1)

6. Small group discussion or large group discussion

7. Systems and boundaries (PowerPoint 7, Talking Points, Handout 2)

8. Small group discussion or large group debrief

9. Basic concepts of Family Systems Theory (PowerPoint 8-9, Talking Points)

10. Self-differentiation (Power Point 10 - 11, Talking Points, Handout 3)

11. Small group discussion or large group discussion

12. Non-anxious presence (PowerPoint 12, Talking Points)

13. Change and homeostasis (PowerPoint 13 - 14, Talking Points)

14. Emotional triangles (PowerPoint 15 - 16, Talking Points)

15. Anxiety (PowerPoint 17-18, Talking Points, Handout 4)

16. Small group discussion or large group discussion

17. Managing anxiety (PowerPoint 19-20, Talking Points)

18. Wrap-up and closing prayer (PowerPoint 21, Talking Points)
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Handout 1

Draw a “picture” of your church system.

- Include ministry groups like vestry, altar guild, choir, and staff.
- Be sure to include yourself in the picture.
- Show how the ministry groups relate to each other:
  - What are the connections?
  - Are they in close communication or distant?
  - Are they conflicted?
  - Do their ministries overlap and how?
  - Who is their liaison? Contact person? Communicator?

- Does the former clergy person appear in the picture? Where?
- What groups might be unique to your particular church system?
- Have you included the church staff and its connections to groups?
- Are there groups on the outside of the church system that influence the function of your congregation?
- What is your relationship to these groups?
What are the ways your congregation lets visitors know they are members of the system (other than formal ritualization)?

How does a newcomer make the transition to membership?

What are the unspoken rules about who does what, who has access to whom, who has important and necessary information, and who wields power?

What is the cost to exit? How does one give up a given role?

How does your church system form groups – formally or informally? What role do you play in this group formation?
When has one of these steps been useful to you in your role as leader? When might it have been helpful?
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Handout 4

What are some of the signs of anxiety in your congregation at present?

What are some of the ways Jesus dealt with symptoms of anxiety?

What does your knowledge of Christ's relationship with others teach you about effective leadership in your system?

What might you need prayer for in this area of your ministry?