

# The Congregation as an Emotional System

## (Basic Concepts In Outline Form)

### I. System Thinking

- A. System thinking begins with the whole, not with individual parts. Leader and follower function as part of one another.
- B. Homeostatic balance - reciprocal interaction keeps things in a regular pattern, good or bad.
- C. The forces of sameness and differentness provoke emotionality in relationship systems.
- D. When change threatens the system's "staying power," people become anxious.
- E. If the emotionality is not attended to, the survival and integrity of the relationship system will be adversely affected.
- F. There is a parallel between our physical bodies and our relationship systems (i.e., corpus and corporation and organ and organization).
  1. Human beings relate to each other in the way biological cells respond to one another.
  2. The immunological forces of the human body function to ensure both survival and integrity. Immunology is powerfully designed "to keep us apart."
  3. Moving from the biological to the relational, anxious and over reactive people neither regulate themselves nor are regulated by others.
    - a. To survive, relationship systems must also have immune capacities.
    - b. Anxious reactivity is capable of eroding the relationship system.
  4. Two types of hostility threaten the body, as well as relationships.
    - a. Direct hostility is absolutely hostile and inherently harmful.
      - (1) In relational contexts, an example of direct hostility is an abusive father battering a helpless child.
      - (2) In immature relationship systems, minimal frictions and anxieties overtake the immune system.
    - b. Indirect hostility: "Where the response of the organism is a variable in its own survival."
      - (1) Your response to others is proportional to their impact on you.
      - (2) The foreign agent is relatively innocuous but acts as a provocateur, exciting trouble.
      - (3) Indirect hostility produces damage only through exaggerated and purposeless, defensive reactions.
      - (4) Instead of a syntonic reaction (passive tolerance of foreign substance) immunological forces are catatonic (actively attacking) to an extreme
  5. The immune system functions as the organism's integrity to differentiate self from nonself.
    - a. An absence of immunological forces in relationships results in one big emotional clump.
    - b. People lose their integrity to their reactivity.
  6. It is the function of immunology to promote separateness and at the same time to enable togetherness.
    - a. Selfness is for self-preservation and promotes the integrity of each cell.

- b. It makes love possible. Love is participation, not absorption.
- c. Separateness and closeness are always managed within a relationship system.
- d. Lovers develop awareness of others, their own distinctiveness, and value.
- e. Lovers with low resistance to invasion or with an immature immune system swallow each other up.
  - (1) Each makes adjustments in their functioning to relieve disharmony.
  - (2) They enmesh or fuse with one another.
- f. The other extremity is an immune system that misinterprets the threat of differences and overacts to them.

## II: Self-Differentiation

- A. Immunology is a magnificent model for self-differentiation.
  - 1. The purpose of immunology is to separate self from nonself.
  - 2. Self-differentiation is the ability to be separate.
- B. If stewardship is the management of the gift of life, is there not a stewardship of the self, a responsibility for how you manage and define yourself?
  - 1. The Biblical word that comes closest to the concept of “self-differentiation” is steward.
  - 2. A steward holds something in trust for another.
    - a. The first thing one must manage or hold in trust is oneself.
    - b. The antithesis to stewardship is dependency.
    - c. A good steward, does not “deself,” either by distancing or fusing.
  - 3. The characteristics of a self-differentiated person are:
    - a. The capacity to set and respect limits;
    - b. The ability to think, feel, and act for oneself;
    - c. The capacity to handle one’s own destiny;
    - d. The ability to be resilient, to have a repertoire of responses
    - e. The capacity to choose a course of direction and to stay the reactive people want to reroute you;
    - f. The ability to stand up and be counted in matters of principle and belief and still remain with family and community;
    - g. The capacity to retain thinking in anxious circumstances as a way of regulating one’s own reactivity;
    - h. To say “I” when others demand “we” or make an effort to define “you;”
    - i. To stay focused on your own functioning while being aware of others;
    - j. The capacity to be responsible for oneself and responsive to others;
    - k. The ability to allow things to process: allow time, differences, and pain;
    - l. The capacity to imagine;
    - m. The ability to be objective.
- C. Immunology, or the self-differentiating capacity in any relationship system, rests with the leader.
  - 1. Otherwise the relationship system will lack objectivity and responsibility.
  - 2. If, however, the leader handles his or her own reactivity, the leader brings calm and focus to the whole field.

### III. The functional range between undifferentiation and differentiation

#### A. Undifferentiation

1. Opts for certainty
2. Avoids self
- 3.. Looks outside of self
4. Forces others to adapt
5. Seeks cessation of pain

#### B. Differentiation

1. Takes a stand
2. Focuses on self
3. Stays connected to others
4. Sets clear goals
5. Accepts challenge

### IIIA. The Congregation as an Emotional System

- A. What happens in the mundane life of the congregation is natural, for it is what happens in all emotional systems.
- B. Emotional systems are driven by two forces - separateness and closeness.
  1. All people need to become separate selves while remaining in touch with significant people.
  2. If we fear separateness, we get too close or stuck together with others (fusion).
    - a. We lose objectivity.
    - b. We become supersensitive to others' response to us.
    - c. Our actions are emotionally based, attuned to the emotional responses of others.
    - d. We expend energy seeking approval, attacking others for not offering it, or keeping close.
  3. Little energy is left for thinking and behavior based on personal beliefs and goals.
- C. If we fear closeness, we isolate or cut off others (distance).
  1. We lose connection with others.
  2. We become insensitive to others' response to us.
  3. Our actions are rigid, not attuned to the emotional response to others.
  4. We put energy into identifying ourselves over against others through rebellion or indifference.
  5. Little energy is left for thinking and behavior based on genuine care for others.
- D. We exit somewhere along the continuum between fusion and distance--too close, too distant--signs of chronic anxiety.

### IV. Anxiety

- A. Anxiety is emotional disturbance. Acute anxiety is the emotional disturbance that is crisis generated. Chronic anxiety is structured into the system itself.
  1. Health systems handle acute anxiety with resiliency.

2. Unhealthy systems are, by nature, anti-resilient.
- B. To bind anxiety, emotional systems use three primary mechanisms: distancing, fusing, and triangling.
  1. Emotional distance gives an individual time to control his own reactions to others by avoidance or withdrawal.
    - a. It is reactive.
    - b. It only heightens anxiety because distancing increases the separateness between people.
  2. Emotional fusion results in the opposite functioning position: People become “stuck together.” Anxiety is bound by pleasing or manipulating others.
    - a. The relationship is stable but less reliable.
    - b. Trust and mutual respect diminish.
  3. The most common way to bind anxiety is emotional triangling.
    - a. Triangles detour the conflict.
    - b. Anxiety not bound in one relationship is played out in another relationship.

#### V. Functioning Position

- A. No functioning position in itself is “good” or “bad,” but a position becomes dysfunctional if it is extreme, rigid, or always anxiety-binding.
  1. Dysfunctional means an imbalance in meeting the needs of separateness and closeness.
  2. Extreme positions are indicative of high anxiety.
- B. One dysfunctional position is “catching” the anxiety for the whole system.
  1. In dysfunctional families, anxiety is always focused on the same person, “identified patient,” or “symptom bearer” for the family.
  2. Congregations known as “pastor-eaters,” habitually bind their anxiety by blaming the pastors, who dysfunction in whatever ways they are prone to dysfunction.

#### VI: Reciprocity

- A. We live in invisible processes of mutual influence.
  1. What you do is a function of what I do.
  2. Our feeling and behaviors are related to and dependent on the feelings and behavior of all the others in the emotional system.
- B. Because a congregation is an emotional system, members function in reciprocal relationship one another.
  1. How the pastor acts is a function of how the committee acts.
  2. How the committee acts is a function of how the pastor acts.
  3. The reciprocity is reinforcing.
  4. It is as if one part of a unit gains strength as another part loses it, and vice versa.
- C. A multitude of reinforcing reciprocals are possible in an emotional system.
- D. In a congregational emotional system, you are apt to find such counterbalancing functioning positions as these:
  1. Over functioning pastor/under functioning lay leaders.
  2. Pastors afraid of conflict/individuals ready to do battle

3. Pastors who please/congregations who expect a lot.
4. Disorganized pastor/super-organized secretary.
5. Pastors resistant to change/people insistent on change.
6. Pastor as parent/church member as child.

## VII: Triangles

- A. Triangling relationships are formed:
  1. When one person is always in the “outside” position.
  2. When a person is over involved in solving another’s problem with someone else.
  3. When a person has a strong emotional reaction to one person but turns to another for comfort and support.
  4. When a person is anxiously going through a major life crisis.
  5. When a person is over focused on someone else.
  6. When two people have little freedom to speak honestly about feelings.
- B. Edwin Friedman sagely warns: “In the concept of an emotional triangle, what Peter says to you about his relationship with Paul has to do with his relationship with you!”

## VIII: Effective Leadership

- A. An organism functions best when its leader is well-differentiated.
  1. The leader’s capacity for self-definition is more important than one’s ability to motivate others.
  2. People function best when they are responsible for their own functioning rather than for how others function.
- B. The leader is responsible for his or her position, not for the whole congregation.
  1. To be responsible for how others function is to invite incredible stress and anxiety.
  2. The problem is compounded by pastors and lay leaders who accept the dysfunctional arrangement.
- C. It is the task of any leader to affect integrity, not to promote dependence.
  1. Dependent people in relationship systems are always the most serious, anxious, reactive and nonthinking people.
  2. They are focused on their anxiety, lack imagination, employ a narrow repertoire of responses, fail to be objective, and demand a quick solution to their troubles.
- D. Destructive processes are always enabled more when the leaders is too concerned about consensus and harmony.
  1. It is the “false prophets” who promise tranquility.
  2. Sabotage is the specialty of the dependent.
  3. If the leader misreads their hostility and propaganda and exaggerates one’s own prose devices, that reinforces their hostility.

## IX: Leadership and Challenge

- A. A well-defined leader has the capacity to endure pain.
  1. Objectivity and judgment will be sharpened with those who are free to criticize and challenge.

2. Pain and challenge foster growth, maturity, and integrity in the host cell, in the leader.
- B. The well-defined leader will motivate others to use their own pain as a stimulator.
  1. She will not let those in pain use her as their stimulator morphine (“cheap grace”).
  2. Immature people believe that the simple answer to conflict is for the other people or party to change.
  3. Unless there is a shift in the emotional process - how people interact and function - the dividing forces persist.

#### X: Leadership as Maturity

- A. Leadership is an emotional process.
  1. The key is how the leader is functioning, how the leader defines the self, how the leader stays connected to others.
  2. In emotional systems there is no polarity between leader and follower.
  3. The head has immense influence on the rest of the body.
  4. The less-defined try to sabotage a well-functioning leader.
    - a. The dependent have the most at stake in a relationship.
    - b. They become anxious when closeness is not sameness.
- B. Personal maturity is the central factor in leadership, not management technique, organizational philosophy, or control tactics.
  1. A well-functioning leader does not take votes or control sales slips.
  2. A leader is not interested in pleasing everyone or making a carbon copy of herself.
- C. From systems viewpoint, leadership (according to Edwin Friedman) is described as follows:
  1. A leader bears witness to something, behaves with resilience, and performs playfully.
  2. A leader is able to distinguish between “issues” and “processes.”
  3. A leader’s effectiveness is not based on how other people function.
  4. A leader stays out of the “feedback position,” not reacting to reactivity.
  5. A leader knows that her own anxiety can do her in more than the others’ reactivity.
  6. A leader is aware that she is an object of displacement by nature of her position, and that the anxious will bind anxiety from another relationship in the leader/follower relationship.
  7. A leader defines herself to the reactivity rather than reacts to it.
  8. A leader tolerates another’s pain and thereby contributes to the sufferer’s growth at the same time.

#### XI: Vision

- A. An emotional system creates a balance of relationships around emotional forces.
  1. Everyone impacts on everyone else to maintain the balance.
  2. Interactional patterns are automatic, unconscious, and fixed.
  3. The interactions are reciprocally reinforcing.
- B. Once a balance of relationship is secured through patterned, reciprocal interaction, there is resistance to change.

- C. Every emotional system experiences anxiety: the more the system is maintained by the extremes (fusion and distance) the more susceptible it is to anxiety and the more reactive the relations becomes.
  - 1. There is reactivity to reactivity.
  - 2. What is lacking is intentionality and objectivity.
- D. "Vision," says Warren C. Bennis, "is the commodity of leaders."
- E. Leaders have a target that beckons, some guiding purpose, or a moving goal.
- F. A self-defined leader has a vision. The leader knows what he wants:
  - 1. Gives it focused attention.
  - 2. Communicates his intentions to others.
  - 3. Positions himself to inspire and teach in order to gain the commitment of others to carry out the vision.
  - 4. Keeps in touch with others.
  - 5. Stays the course when reactivity arises.
- G. If I have integrity, the courage of my convictions enables me to meet anxiety, yours and mine, to challenge the greatest anxiety of all, the threat of non-being.
- H. A leader works out what he believes.
  - 1. Vision shaped and influenced by conviction, focuses on empowering people.
  - 2. You cannot lead from a negative or oppositional position.
- I. It is primarily vision which enables the leader to stay on course.
  - 1. Vision itself does not change the nature of life.
  - 2. Vision can change the capacity to respond to it.