

Church as Family Systems Sermon

In my home church, there was a period of great stress. It happened about 15 years ago. This all happened before I became involved, so the information came to me as second hand lore. There developed an in group and an out group. The “ingroup” got all the attention of the minister. She was very attentive to the pastoral care needs of the ingroup while ignoring the other people in her congregation. The trouble in the congregation also revolved around the issue of wanting to become more multicultural which might have involved a physical move into the city of Lansing. Factions became painfully divided. This period lasted two to three years, eventually leading to the forced resignation of the minister

Much thinking and writing has been done around applying family systems theory to what happens in a church. Often there is an “Identified patient” person in the system who is causing all the trouble. The identified patient in the short vignette I just recounted was the minister. In other situations it could be a lay leader.

According to family systems theory, in troubled situations, the common denominator is anxiety. Anxiety builds and there is often an event that happens to release some of the pressure of all the anxiety that has built up. Like maybe an annual congregational meeting. Anxiety about money or the budget, about group identity, about intrapersonal dynamics, about roles and responsibilities. The minister, according to the literature, comes in to provide a non anxious presence. If she or he is worth her/his salt as a minister, the minister presides over and listens to what might be the sources of the anxiety. If the minister gets sucked into this milieu of anxiety, he or she loses the capacity to turn down the level of conflict. The literature suggests that the healing time for midrange to severely anxious congregations is two to five years.

## 4 properties of systems

1. Every system is a whole and this whole is more than the sum of its parts. No single neuron is capable of complex thought, but the human brain is a constellation of all those neurons is.
2. Homeostasis – the capacity to self sustain. A system is able to create a stable system over time. We get energy and input from external sources, and then return something back to the environment. If a system is closed, it will eventually suffocate and die. A system is self correcting and self regulating so that it can return to a state of homeostasis. The Unitarian Fellowship of London has a history of over 50 years of self sustaining activity. Chances are that you will have the ability to self correct and change.
3. Every system evolves. Every system can adapt and becomes complex so as to respond to the world. This exploratory self organizing can be very uncomfortable. In theological language it is called the dark night of the soul. Your ministers will come and go: they will hopefully help you to evolve, but it is you who are left to engage in the maturation process.
4. Every system is part of a larger system. Think about the image of Russian nesting dolls. Those dolls are held within something larger. This congregation is held within the larger Canadian Unitarian Council. London is isolated – 170 kilometers away from a neighboring Unitarian congregation. That’s why it is so important to your health to connect with the

larger movement. If you do not, you risk becoming ingrown and myopic. That's why exchanges like last Sunday are so good for all of us.

There are questions for you as you think of this congregation as a family system: First,..assuming that someone(s) is sick in the house, and that we want to do something about healing, how do we go about doing that? Do we focus all our energy on the sickness? Do we sound alarm bells that might serve to make the whole system anxious? How do we work on healing what is sick while still fostering health where it exists? How do we decide what is the correct prescription?

Do you really want to get well? When a person or a congregation is sick for a long time, their identity gets wrapped up in being ill. During that difficult time, my home congregation got a reputation as a "minister eater." It was not until 10 years later when the current minister arrived on the scene and announced that she was there to stay, at least until her son, then 6, graduated from high school. She had the courage to name this and the congregation has had the courage to change their behavior.

Are we able to incorporate new views and experiences? A sad human tendency is that we all gravitate to information that fits with our views. We rarely entertain facts that contradict our views.

How is the level of transparency within our community? Do we participate in a culture of secrecy where triangulation is rampant? Or are all of our interactions happy in the light of day?

Just as we get annual checkups with our doctor, some here have suggested that we might want to take an inventory of our congregation's health. It might be possible to schedule an all church retreat, and to reflect on the status of health and well being in your community.

The congregation needs to grow up and take responsibility for its own life. One way is a more intentional, regular connection to the larger UU world. That way you could discover anew that the Unitarian Fellowship of London is not the only pebble on the beach. Seeing how other Unitarian Universalists do church would only be a good thing.

Also, it may put you in good stead to monitor the level of anxiety in your congregation's life. If the anxiety level gets too high, this is a danger signal.

I celebrate the truth telling that has been part of this community since my arrival. The focus groups made possible by the Strategic Planning Task Force and the process of covenanting show me that you can speak the truth in love. You may not always agree but at least, love and truth are present here. And in that, there's congregational health.