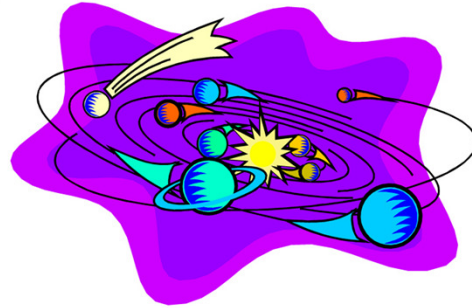


Family Systems Theory: The Congregation as a System

Using the lens of **Family Systems Theory** as a way of better understanding the dynamics of congregational life.



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Family Systems Theory: The Congregation as a System - 1

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Understanding the basics of family systems theory helps church leaders see the congregation as a system of interrelated parts. Family systems theory's focus is on the function of the organization relative to the relationships that are within it.

With a clear understanding of Family Systems Theory you can:

- be more self-aware and self-differentiating.
- be better equipped to identify those in your congregation with good leadership skills.
- better recognize and deal with anxiety in the system.
- lower your own anxiety enabling you to function more effectively.

How familiar are you with family systems theory? In what context have you explored this theory? How has it been helpful – or not? (Engage in a general discussion.)

Let's take a look first at "systems."

What is a SYSTEM?

Any group of living beings in regular contact with each other.



Family Systems Theory: The Congregation as a System - 2

Fresh Start

Talking Points

A system is

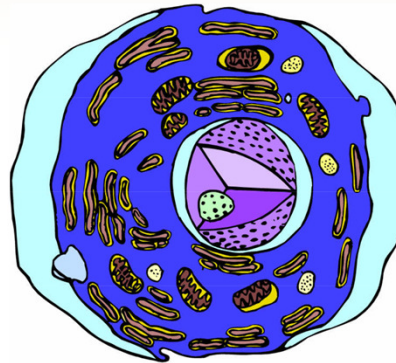
- any interrelated group of living beings
- that are in regular contact with one another
- and which operate under similar principles, whether conscious or not.

Systems theory can be used to understand:

- Your family
- The relationship of your nuclear family to your parents/in-laws/relatives
- The vestry; the altar guild; the youth group
- Your entire church – in which the vestry, altar guild, and youth group are members
- Your diocese – in which all the congregations (and clergy and bishop) are members
- The Episcopal Church – in which all the dioceses (and General Convention, Presiding Bishop, and administrative/other organizations) are members
- Etc.

How Systems are Ordered ...

All systems tend to order themselves and behave similarly, regardless of their make-up.



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Fresh Start

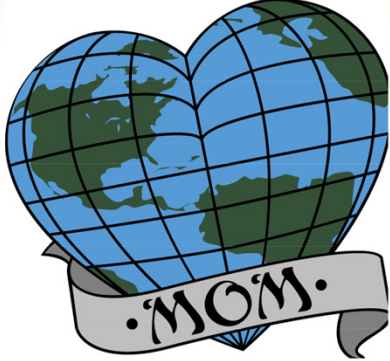
Talking Points

Edwin Friedman, the “founder” of family systems theory, spent a lot of time at the National Institutes of Health, studying the immune system in the body. He discovered that the body’s way of organizing itself for its own protection, functioning, and well being mirrors the ways that families and organizations order themselves for better functioning and self-protection. So one of the intriguing findings of family systems theory is that ALL living organisms tend to order themselves and behave similarly – from the simplest to the most complicated.

Family systems theorists contend that similar dynamics are at work in all systems.

- One human cell
- The human body
- A nuclear family
- An extended family
- A congregation
- A vestry
- A nation
- The community of nations
- The earth
- The universe

System Language



The language we use to talk about a system is often anthropomorphic

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

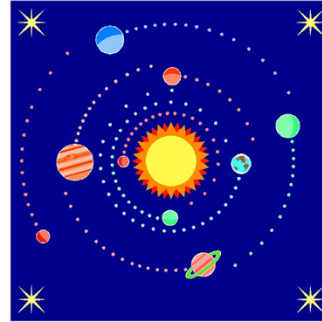
Because systems, no matter how large or small, tend to act like an organism, we often use anthropomorphic (human-like) language to describe its behavior and motivations. Our language acknowledges our recognition that systems are living, changing things. Consider the way we talk about systems.

We use words like the following when talking about the “system” (vestry, staff, church, diocese):

- Needs
- Fears
- Wants
- Cringes
- Hopes
- Panics
- Worships

Family Systems Theory

- Looks at the whole system and not just the individual parts
- Focuses on the **context** of a system
- Encourages us to examine our own responses to situations



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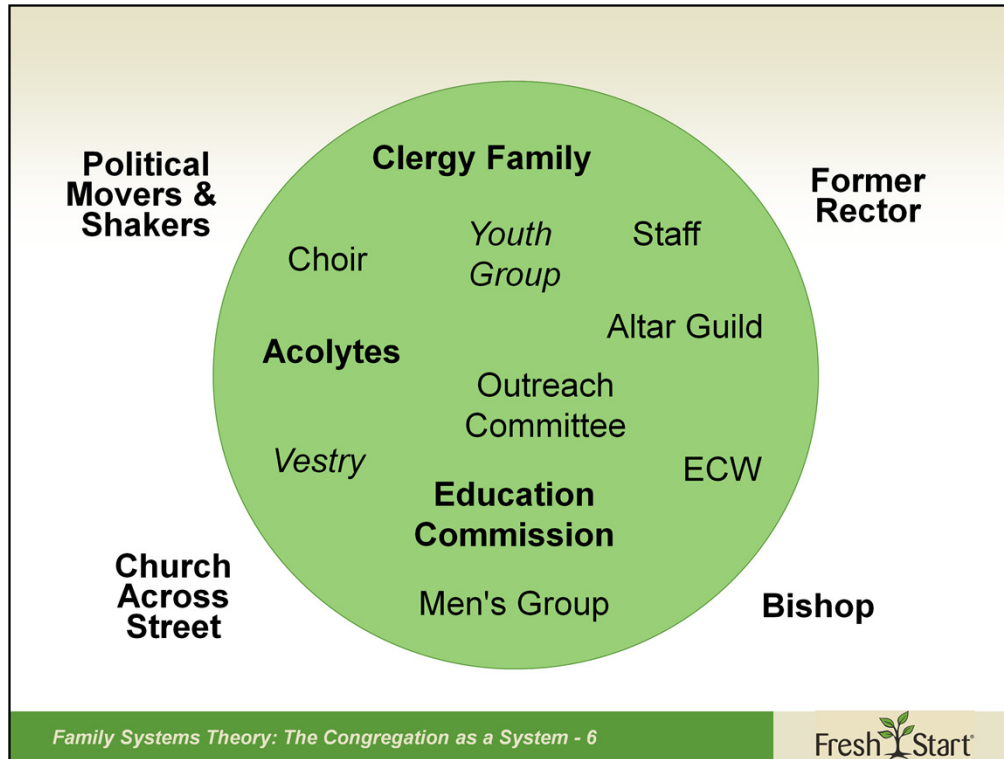
Fresh Start

Talking Points

Family systems theory grew out of counseling situations. Its creators began to see that no issue could be isolated – or treated – outside the context in which it was located. Murray Bowen, another early theorist, noticed this in his work with families. Clinicians began to see that for healthy interventions to happen the system had to be viewed as a whole and not piece by piece. In systems theory, one cannot look at an issue without looking at its environment.

Family systems theory focuses on the context of ministry. This is why it is so important to look at the whole congregational system with all its parts, components, ministries, groups, individuals, neighbors, etc.

Family systems theory is most helpful when it focuses on self and one's patterns of interaction with others and of responses to situations.



Talking Points

It is helpful, when looking at the church through the family systems theory lens, to consider the various groups and organizations (sub-systems) within the congregation.


Distribute Handout 1 (You may want to give participants newsprint and markers for this exercise.)

Have people complete their "pictures" individually. If you have a clergy-only group, have them pair with someone else and share their pictures. If you have a mixed clergy-lay group, have them meet as a congregational team. After they have had time to share, facilitate a general discussion on their observations.

How were your pictures the same? How were they different? What "ahas" did you have?

Systems and Boundaries

- Both external and internal boundaries.
- Always internally connected.
- Assign specialized roles to their members.
- Develop rites and rituals in order to bond members and to maintain and preserve the group.



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Fresh Start

Talking Points

Boundary delineations exist both within the system and between the system and everything/everyone else. You don't often know where these boundaries are until you cross them or someone else crosses yours - then the system let's you know.

Systems are always internally connected. The question is how, and how effectively. Even a "cut-off" – that is, an on-going feud or frozen silence, or a "disconnect", is one style of being connected.

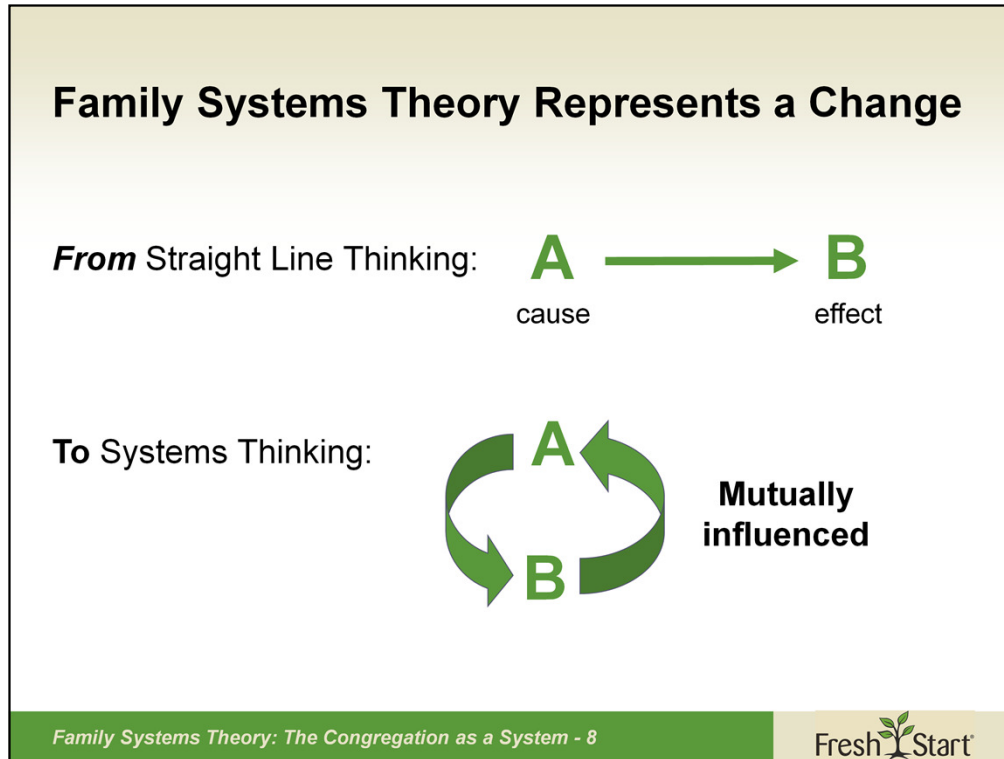
Every system assigns roles, conscious and unconscious, to its members.

Conscious, formal ones: warden, secretary, treasurer, convention delegate.

Unconscious, informal ones: the naysayer, the eternal optimist, the social/ justice activist, the mediator, the one who always can be counted on to "name the elephant in the room," the ones whose "role" it is to always say "we never did it that way before," or "it'll never work," or "what would Jesus do?" or "we don't have the money." Ever notice that when one of these people rotate off the vestry, someone automatically begins to fill their place?

Consider the response when changes are proposed for liturgy. Look at the importance of (and the battles we've had over) baptism, admission to communion, marriage and re-marriage, and passing of the peace. More informally, look at all the hello/good-bye rituals practiced on a Sunday morning; or the rituals of membership – like families that occupy the same pew each Sunday or those who stay in a parish no matter what happens with its leadership or politics. Let's look at your congregation and how it maintains boundaries.

Distribute Handout 2 and give participants a few minutes to jot down their responses. Ask them to discuss their responses in their small groups or facilitate a large group discussion using the questions on the handout.



Talking Points

Even with boundaries, however, systems theory promotes the interrelationship of everything to everything else. Looking at congregations – or any organism – through this lens requires a change in thinking. From a systems standpoint, interactions produce responses, which then produce interactions, and so on...

Systems thinking considers the interrelatedness of the parts (the Body of Christ).

Some Basic Concepts of Family Systems Theory

- Self Differentiation
- Non-anxious presence
- Balance between resistance to and need for change
- Homeostasis
- Emotional Triangle
- Importance of anxiety and stress

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Talking Points

These are some basic elements of family systems theory: What comes to mind when these terms are mentioned?

Let's look at each in turn.

Self-Differentiation: Get Yourself Together

- **You** are the most important intervention you can make in any system.
- **You** must be clear about your own position and response in order to promote health in your congregation.



Talking Points

The only person you can really, ultimately change is yourself. You are unable to change anyone else (spouse, child, warden, vestry, nemesis), but if you change your functioning toward that person, then she/he has the opportunity to change in response – because every member is connected to every other member, and no part of the Body can say to another part “I don’t need you.”

Imagine a hanging mobile. ***(You may want to bring one to the session as a visual example.)*** What happens when you move one object on the mobile? All parts move! This is how a system works, and when one person in a system (especially the leader) makes a change, everyone moves – whether they realize it or not.

Cycle of Self-Differentiation

- Having a healthy sense of limits.
- Being clear about what you believe.
- Being able to clearly articulate what you believe.
- Expecting sabotage as a system's natural response to anxiety and/or stress.
- Being able to stay connected in spite of differences.

Talking Points

These are some of the characteristics of self-differentiation, a concept formulated by Murray Bowen but expanded by others.

Divide the participants into five groups by asking them to count off and then sit with others who have the same number. Distribute Handout 3.

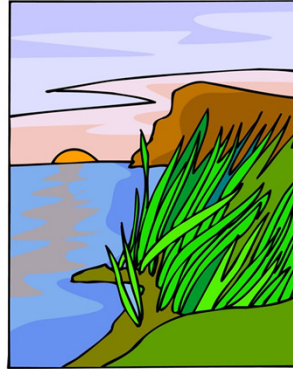
This handout shows the elements necessary for self-differentiation. I would like each group to focus on one of the steps: group 1 on step 1, group 2 on step 2 etc..

In your small group, think of a time when you used one of that step or a time when this step would have been helpful in leading a congregation or other group. Describe the situation and what you or others did that illustrate that step.

Give participants plenty of time for thinking, then for discussion. Then have small groups report to larger group as time and format allows.

The Non-Anxious Presence

Becoming self-differentiated gives you the ability to be non-anxious in the face of stress, pain, difficulty, or “stuck” thinking. It is a way of “being,” rather than doing.



Talking Points

Family systems theorists and theologians focus on the critical importance of leaders being “non-anxious” in the face of trouble. Jesus provides a wonderful example of a non-anxious presence – what is an example of him exhibiting this kind of behavior?

Change? Now? Why? A Natural Response

- A system must change or die. Leaders must recognize the need for change.
- Change involves the death of something so that something else can live – the basis of our faith is in a cycle of birth/life/death/resurrection.
- A system will change as little as possible until the system itself recognizes the need for change, which must be introduced in a healthy, promising, positive fashion.

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Fresh  Start

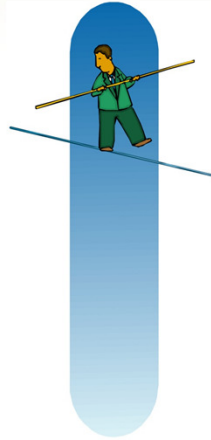
Talking Points

Any system resists change until it becomes necessary to live a healthy life. Systems know that if they don't change, they die. To be healthy, a system must feel, see, and/or acknowledge the need for change. Even when the proposed change is good, it may be resisted. Congregations that are experiencing a change in clergy leadership are naturally going to experience resistance.

Change can feel like a resurrection experience. The old is dying, and the new is being born. It is the essence and basis of our spirituality and theology – new life out of death – birth-death-resurrection! Therefore we are constantly being called into change. It's a "God thing". Because change can feel like death, however, we should not be surprised that systems resist it. We can be sympathetic to the anxiety of the system and sympathetic to the fear behind the resistance without buying into it. There is a lot of ministry to be done whenever a system is facing change (of whatever kind)...and every system faces continual change.

One might say that the very thing we resist the most - is the most life-giving – CHANGE. Thus there is a continuous but natural tension between the static and the dynamic in the in all life forms, including congregations!

Homeostasis: Wanting to Maintain Balance



- Systems naturally want to stay the same until the need for change is recognized.
- Leaders must pay attention to resistance and plan changes intentionally.
- This **does not** mean that change should be avoided.

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

Homeostasis is defined as: a relatively stable state of equilibrium or a tendency toward such a state between the different but interdependent elements or groups of elements of an organization, population or group. (Merriam-Webster Online)

Much like a rubber band, when a system is stretched it tends to want to return to its original relaxed position. Over time, stretching may change the band's size, but it may take a long time and much perseverance.

It is critical to understand that a system will change – but the change must be recognized as life-giving, energizing, fruitful, healthy.

How does your congregation maintain its balance? What are the drivers of resistance? What are the drivers for growth?

**Emotional Triangles:
Both Stabilizing and Destructive**

- A is at odds with B
- A goes to C with his/her problem in an attempt to change B's behavior
- C gets stuck holding the stress, B is still clueless and A feels better

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

This is perhaps the **most** common occurrence in any system. It happens all the time and to everyone. A system cannot survive without triangles. They are stabilizing mechanisms as well as vehicles for transferring anxiety.

This dynamic is known to **every** vestry person and congregational leader. You can see their eyes light up when you describe it! A communicant (A) has a “beef” with the rector (B), but instead of going directly to the rector with it, comes instead to the vestry person (C) in an attempt to get the vestry person to take responsibility for both telling the rector and getting the problem solved. This is known as “strangulation by triangulation”.

Woe be unto “C” if she/he lets it happen!! The **only** way to play this game and win is not to play. The burden of anxiety between A and B cannot be shifted to C unless C takes it! Suddenly C has all the stress and A and B are out taking a stroll!

De-triangulation was called the “universal antibiotic” by Ed Friedman for every known system. He often said that it was the one thing you could prescribe for **any** system to improve its functioning. De-triangulation might include:

- Saying to A, “I’m sorry. This is a problem between you and the rector. I hope you will take it to him/her.”
- Saying to A, “This is a legitimate concern you have. While the rector may not want to hear it, I think it is important for you to say it to him.”
- Saying to A, “If you are nervous about saying this to the rector, I’d be happy to go with you to see him/her, so that you have some support while doing so. But this is really **your** issue with the rector.”
- Saying to A, “I’d be happy to have you ‘practice’ with me what you intend to say directly to the rector, and if you like, I’d be happy to give you some feedback.”

Such a strategy leaves the responsibility – and the anxiety – where it belongs (with A) and leaves C much less anxious.

Describe a time when you experienced “Strangulation by Triangulation” and/or “Healthy De-Triangling”.

Sometimes the components of the triangle are not actually present or tangible ...



- They might be substances, like alcohol.
- They might be someone who is no longer around.
- They might be processes, jobs or issues.



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Fresh Start

Talking Points

The components of an emotional triangle are not always present in the here and now. Sometimes the most significant player is someone who has died, moved away, or become part of the congregational lore. Sometimes it is the legendary “King David” of the congregation – the rector who could do no wrong or the senior warden whose leadership was invaluable during a tough time in the church.


Sometimes a component of a triangle is an idea, a process or an issue. Some examples might be:

- A vision that is established for growing the church
- A ministry in the congregation or an idea for ministry
- Canons of the church
- The format of the newsletter or vestry meeting calendar
- An addiction to alcohol or drugs
- A policy or guideline
- Church architecture (where the furniture goes!)

Give some of examples from your own experience of components of a triangle which were not necessarily present or tangible. **Capture these examples on a flip chart.**

Anxiety

- Is a helpful “alarm”
- Exists in every system
- Can mean salvation or ruin
- Is contagious
- Is free-floating, though usually settles somewhere



Family Systems Theory: The Congregation as a System - 17
Fresh Start

Talking Points

Anxiety is present in every system. It is a helpful signal that something is going on and needs a response.

Some people thrive on anxiety. They feel the most alive when passing it on to as many other people as possible. If there's nothing to be particularly anxious about, these people will often make up something (note St. Paul's frequent prohibition against gossip!).

The maturity of any system (individual or group) can be measured by its ability to tolerate an appropriate amount of anxiety. Leadership can be measured by how comfortable one can be in the midst of others' discomfort.

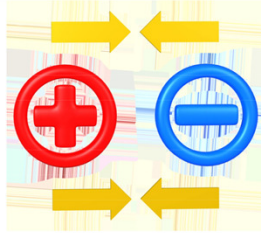
It is quite common for the system to place much of its anxiety in one place, onto one issue, onto one person. This is scapegoating in the traditional – and Biblical – understanding. This will often present itself as a parish which:

- decides that the rector/Christian education director/bishop is the reason for all their problems,
- focuses virtually all its energy on fighting against the “new” prayer book, ordination of women, the inclusion of gay/lesbian people, pulling the altar out from the wall, a linking/merger with another congregation, or
- sees the changing demographics and the resulting changes in ethnic composition of the neighborhood as the source of their distress.

Oddly enough, if the scapegoat is a person, it is likely to be either the **most** powerful person (rector) or the **least** powerful person (outcast or child). Occasionally – as in the case of a rector who is going through a trauma of his own (divorce, death of a spouse or child) – these two traits are to be found in one person (both most powerful by virtue of her/his position, and least powerful temporarily because of the trauma). Such a situation is a particularly vulnerable time for that clergy person, and really ugly things can happen. It is a time when dioceses should be especially attentive and should offer considerable support.

The Plus and Minus of Anxiety

- The change that can come from anxiety can be energizing, life-giving and freeing.
- But there is a downside: the system can “break” from too much anxiety.



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Fresh Start

Talking Points

Symptoms of anxiety include behaviors that usually keep people looking outward and away from self. “If the problem is OUT THERE, then I don’t have to deal with it.”

We must understand that anxiety is necessary and essential to the system. Stress and tension are what keep the system working. Stress keeps the system moving and changing, although too much stress causes the system to break. Scientists who study stress differentiate between *eustress* and *distress*. Only the latter, usually in its chronic form, is harmful – good stress (*eustress*) keeps systems motivated and alive.

When a system experiences a significant change it can become unbalanced. Figuring out how to incorporate the new circumstances is required to bring the system back into balance. During the struggle to restabilize, many members will long for balance and homeostasis. The two most obvious ways to regain that balance are:

- To go back to the way we’ve always done things. In other words, the rubber band has stretched too far – it’s time to “snap back”.
- To redefine our purpose and identity to incorporate the changed circumstances; to re-examine what we believe and articulate that belief.

It is the latter way that re-energizes the system’s members: giving them new roles, allowing them to discard old ones, and renewing their spiritual energy.

Distribute Handout 4 and ask participants to reflect on the life of Christ as they respond to the questions. After they have had time to jot down some responses, ask them to share their observations in their small groups or facilitate a large group discussion. If the discussion takes place in small groups, debrief in the larger group.

Systems Often Manage Their Anxiety Negatively By:

- Moving closer to the source of the anxiety – sometimes called “fusion”
- Moving further away from the source of the anxiety or from the entire system – sometimes called a “cut off”
- Obsessing
- Strengthening or solidifying of special interest groups, factions or sub-groups

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Fresh  Start

Talking Points

Sometimes in a congregation, the most anxious person may decide to run for vestry, or may threaten to leave the church if their “problem is not fixed”. This behavior is a direct result of anxiety.

Sometimes individuals might experience a nearly obsessive preoccupation in which to channel the anxiety (overeating, alcohol, saving money, spending money) which may evolve into full-blown addiction.

When in your experience have you seen these things happen?



“Organizations do best when they focus on direction and vision.”

Margaret Wheatley

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Fresh Start

Talking Points

A way to deal with anxiety in a more positive fashion is to focus on direction and vision. As Bishop Claude Payne once said, “The church must be either mission driven or issue driven – it cannot do both.”

When have you seen this refocusing on direction and vision work?

“Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.”

I Corinthians 12:14

“For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we who are many are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”

Romans 12:4

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Fresh Start 

Talking Points

The purpose of looking at a congregation through the lens of family systems theory is not to diagnose, but to understand. When one understands what makes a congregation function in both healthy and unhealthy ways, one is better positioned to bring health to a community. Through self-differentiated leadership by both clergy and laity, congregations can move forward, focusing on their strengths and living out of their positives.

“We who are one body share one bread, one cup.” Our liturgy is rich with references to the Church as the Body of Christ.

Paul’s use of the Body of Christ as a metaphor for the Church is an apt description of the interconnectedness of the members of a congregation (as well as the congregation’s relationship to the larger Church). St. Paul asserts that each part of the Body is related to and affected by every other part. The hand cannot say to the eye “I don’t need you.” This is not just a hoped-for goal of the Church; it is indeed an accurate description of how things actually work.