

How Congregations are Like Families
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This is the first in a series of articles that will outline key features of Family Systems Theory and how it relates to our congregational life. As many of you recall, in February 2010, Urbandale United Church of Christ hosted a workshop facilitated by staff of the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center. The two-day session introduced us to many of the concepts of Family Systems and how we can make use of these ideas in our own lives.

We have all grown up in families where we have learned certain ways of coping with stress and conflict. We bring these patterns into every relationship we have – with our spouses or partners, friends, co-workers and into our church family. In The Leaders Journey, the authors describe our “wired togetherness.” We have lived our whole lives as part of a living system of relationships and frequently we find ourselves reacting to one another almost instinctively. Our experiences in our families of origin teach us who we are, how to relate and how to survive. Depending on the messages we received, we may view the world as a fearful place or a safe place. Consequently, we have gained a perspective that leaves us feeling either secure or anxious or somewhere in between.

When we become part of a church family, we bring all of our emotional experiences along with us and so does everyone else! This is when things get interesting. In living, imperfect congregational systems, we can sometimes find a pastor who is **over-functioning** which may lead to an under-functioning membership. We may also find ourselves caught in **emotional triangles** where someone may approach us to complain about someone else. These triangulations are stressful for the person who may be hearing the information and it may relieve the stress of the unhappy person. See the dilemma? So, in order to avoid getting caught in the sharp angles of a triangle, it helps to have a **non-anxious presence**. If someone is non-anxious, she can hear the concerns of another without becoming overwhelmed by the information. She can listen, empathize, and resist the temptation to make the situation better. A good mantra to recite in such situations is, “this is not my problem to fix.” It is amazing how freeing it is to let ourselves off the hook and to not feel compelled to solve the issue.

Many church members face significant struggles with their families of origin. Certain unhealthy patterns of relating frequently develop and as a result, the church system experiences stress. Some common patterns include:

- Blaming and shaming instead of taking personal responsibility
- Competition and comparisons instead of accepting each person for who they are
- Living in denial and delusion rather than facing problems openly

In all of this, the good news is that unhealthy patterns of behavior can be overcome. Healing comes from being grounded in one's relationship with God and in relationship with one another. Some people may seek out the listening ear of a caregiver, pastor or close friend. Others may need to work with a therapist to understand and resolve issues from their family of origin. If you are interested in learning more about Systems Theory and congregational life, I would recommend The Leader's Journey: Accepting The Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation.