

St. Paul's Vestry, October 7, 2021

Relational Systems



Self-Differentiation

- **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.

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. 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.

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.

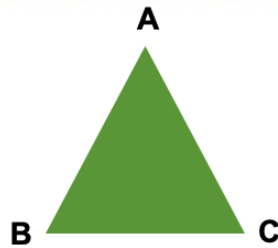
Family systems theorists and theologians focus on the critical importance of leaders being "non-anxious" in the face of trouble. Jesus provides a wonderful example of a non-anxious presence – what is an example of him exhibiting this kind of behavior?

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.

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



Emotional Triangles

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”.

Anxiety

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

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.

Creating Boundaries and Inviting a different relationship

When you ____, I feel ____.