

Week 2

Assignment:

Read Chapters 3 and 4 (pp. 26-51)

Chapter 3 "The Church in Transition as a Human System" highlights:

Systems Approach background

Systems Thinking

"A whole is not the sum of its parts; every part of a system is a sum of the whole." (p. 28)

Organizational Structures

Structure: the arrangement, positioning, and relationships among the component parts of a system

Subsystem: the component organizational units that are maintained by rules, by roles, and by rituals.

"Whenever something happens with one of the subsystems that seems hard to understand, the systems thinker remembers to look for connections and parallels with other parts of the system." (p.30)

Triangles: three individuals or groups of individuals who interact in a pattern that may or may not be balanced.

Boundaries: the invisible, permeable, emotional borders marking the subsystems of a church. Boundaries limit access to relationships, information, and decision making.

Stories

What are the congregation's myths, symbols, themes, and plots by which it knows itself?

What are the things no one wants to talk about?

Reframing the story to bring it more into alignment with reality

Three System Skills

Skill 1: Seeing the process as well as the content.

Content: the issue on which a conflict is focused -- the apparent problem, the what.

Process: the structure of relationship beneath the conflict -- the "underlying" problem, the how.

Skill 2: Seeing parallels at different levels of the system.

Skill 3: Responding with playfulness instead of seriousness.

Playfulness: chosen behavior characterized by surprise, humor, or reversal, and intended to continue a relationship without being controlled or controlling.

Playfulness moves the system forward.

Seriousness: behavior drawn from predetermined roles, rules, and rituals, arising from anxiety and intended to get the upper hand in interactions by controlling or by avoiding being controlled. Seriousness holds the system back.

Focus on Health

Questions:

In Chapter 3 questions, assign each group a different question (set) to address and share.

Perhaps 1 as a whole group

Groups: 3-4; 5-6

Whole group 7 & 9

Individual 8

Chapter 4 "Understanding Conflict and Power" highlights:

Conflict and power are normal in congregations. Interim time is the time to address them!

Conflict: contradictory points of view, or struggle for limited resources

Power: "the ability to do or act," the ability to make things happen or keep them from happening

What are Church Fights About?

Church identity - may be a reflection of a fear of losing place or status as a church in the community, anxiety about the future

Who is in charge? - healthy involvement versus interference

What do we believe? - interpretation of scripture, lifestyle and social issues

How do we worship? - traditional, contemporary

Role expectations of leaders - may lead to gaps or clashes

Gap: one person or group thinks that a task is someone else's responsibility and no one takes care of it

Clash: more than one group or individual believes that they are responsible for a matter

Limited resources - money\$, space, scheduling, volunteers

Focus inward? Or focus outward? - both

Malfeasance or misconduct by clergy

Signs of Unhealthy Conflict

Anger

Issues cannot be separated from people

Labeling as sinful or morally wrong instead of as an alternate way of acting a different viewpoint, or an alternate moral choice

Communication is diminished, convoluted, or essentially nonexistent

Vindictiveness

Long list of issues or complaints and begin to recall unresolved issues of the past

Denial of real feelings

Refusal to accept any solutions to the conflict

Using Conflict Constructively

A potential for something positive to come of conflict

Defining issues and searching for solutions

Limit discussion to the real issues

Assume all parties bring some truth to the discussion. Value differences.

Seek to find commonalities

Find answers that meet the needs and interests of all

Spiritual resources that frame the discussion as a discernment process

Agreements that are tolerable if not fully acceptable to all involved

Living with Conflicts

Negotiation process with neutral parties

1. Allow parties involved to see how "their" fight is affecting the entire life of the congregation
2. Moderating influence finding areas of agreement disputants can "live with"
3. Monitor the agreements and hold the disputing parties accountable for them

Moving to Genuine Dialog

Dialog - NOT debate (ground rules encouraging adversarial stances) or discussion (implies argument, a winner)

Dialog: a free flow of ideas between people, conversation with each other not only to state our perspectives, needs, and views, but also to genuinely hear the perspectives, needs, and views of the other

Spiritual Resources

Questions:

2. In what ways have you experienced conflict as a positive presence in your church?

4. What signs of unhealthy conflict have you observed in your church?

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