

6 Lessons That Will Keep Your Church Moving Forward

Theoretically, all that is needed to form a system is for people to spend time together.

Ronald Richardson says, “Emotional systems are like delicately balanced mobiles.” Within the system, all are connected, and what happens on one end affects the other end.

Congregations walk and talk like emotional systems. As long as people gather and interact, emotional processes are at work.

Some of those interactions are positive (joy, comfort, support, cooperation and friendship), but emotional systems are also inherently anxious.

That anxiety keeps the church from moving forward and distracts it from accomplishing its mission and purpose.

My work as pastor has been more directed toward the internal processes than toward any outwardly focused ministry in the community.

The community around us has largely welcomed every good thing we’ve tried to do to minister to it.

Perhaps we could do more, but we are too busy tending to our own internal anxieties.

Healthy churches must dedicate themselves to giving more to their mission in order to live into its purpose.

How does Family Systems Theory affect the way we look at our congregations? Let me offer six ways, adapting insights from Peter Steinke’s 2006 book, “Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times.”

1. Systems Theory is a way of conceptualizing reality.

It organizes our thinking from a specific vantage point. System thinking considers the interrelatedness of the parts.

All of us use organizing principles to arrange our everyday lives into a coherent way to understand what happens in life.

We are meaning-making persons, and systems theory helps us make meaning of how a congregation functions.

2. Systems thinking deepens our understanding of life.

We see it as a rich complexity of interdependent parts. A system is a set of forces and events that interact, such as a weather system or the solar system.

Thinking systemically is to look at the ongoing, vital interaction of the connected parts. Thus, “the whole is typically bigger than the sum of the parts.”

3. Systems thinking teaches us to think of loops rather than lines.

Rather than thinking in linear terms where A causes B, we see that A and B are mutual influences upon one another. What is not always understood is how A and B affect C and D.

Straight-line thinking is appropriate for certain activities, but we mistakenly superimpose linear forces upon interconnected relationships and wonder why they don't fit.

4. Systems thinking focuses attention on how interactions are mutually influenced and how they become patterned or repeated.

Such patterned behavior is observable through stories. Patterned ways of being can be the turf that must be defended when anxiety begins to spike.

Patterned ways of being mean the whole system gets involved in both positive and negative ways.

5. Systems thinking recognizes the power of the whole to organize the parts.

This way of thinking helps us see how the whole is wired together. Systems thinking helps leaders think deeply about how the system operates, including the long repetitive history that some organizations have experienced and not fully understood.

6. Systems theory invites us to think of the system in relationship, to think in

diagnostic terms and to think in prescriptive terms.

Careful reflection will give leaders the pause, the safe distance, the opportunity to consider the story underneath the story to ensure one can offer a response, not merely a reaction.

Editor's note: This is the fourth article in a five-part series. The fifth installment, which will appear next week, will focus on the affect of a calm, reflective leader in leading a healthy congregation. The previous articles in the series are:

[*How Churches, Ministers Build Healthy Relationships - Part 1*](#)

[*Vaccinating Your Church Against the Anxiety Virus - Part 2*](#)

[*Church, Clergy Health Suffers When Chronic Anxiety Spikes - Part 3*](#)