
ANXIETY, EMOTIONS, AND ENCOUNTERS WITH DIFFERENCE: EXPLORING THE ROOTS OF CONFLICT IN CONGREGATIONS

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Abstract

Conflict in faith communities is a ubiquitous feature of contemporary religious life. This essay claims that at the root of such conflict lies anxiety triggered by encounters with difference. Family systems theory describes the emotional core of conflict and reveals the need for more adequate reflection on the expression of feelings in congregations. Theological reflection on conflict and its accompanying emotions argues for an understanding of vulnerability to difference as key to the Church's identity as the body of Christ. Three concrete suggestions are offered for leaders and congregations that struggle to navigate anxiety and difference in their midst, which is essential for healthy congregations; several strategies will be introduced in this article.

Introduction

In 2005, a Protestant congregation became embroiled in an intense conflict regarding homosexuality. That summer, the denomination to which the congregation belonged had passed a resolution supporting marriage rights for same-sex couples. Almost immediately, people within the congregation began taking adamant stands on the issue—some demanding that the congregation disassociate from the denomination, others insisting that the congregation maintain its denominational ties. At times, the conflict grew so heated that people literally shouted at each other, claiming that those on the opposing side were un-Christian or ignorant of Scripture.

When this conflict emerged, the problem appeared to be theological disagreement between church members. However, further reflection on this event suggests that more basic emotional and psychological dynamics were also at

play. In this essay, I argue that at the heart of much congregational conflict lies anxiety triggered by encounters with difference. When such anxiety erupts in faith communities, it can produce powerful affective responses such as fear, anger, sadness, or emotional distancing. In other words, emotions¹ are not the cause of conflict, but rather are reactions to the intense anxiety that so often precipitates or results from conflict in faith communities.

In his classic text *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, family systems theorist Edwin H. Friedman notes that “work systems that deal with the basic stresses of life . . . are particularly susceptible to the rules of family process, including those rules that govern who in the family is likely to become ill. Of all work systems, however, the one that functions most like a family is the church or synagogue.”² In other words, emotional dynamics become especially important in religious organizations because the bonds between members often involve powerful feelings. Given the strength and significance of these emotional bonds, it stands to reason that conflict within congregations will also frequently involve powerful emotional content. In fact, even in faith communities where many people intellectually embrace values of diversity and dialogue, encounters with significant difference frequently produce visceral emotional reactions. Therefore, a thorough investigation of congregational conflict must adequately address its affective dimensions. In this article, I use family systems theory (FST) as a primary theoretical framework for understanding conflict because of its keen attention to anxiety as the most basic emotional process within organizations. I draw upon elements of the theory to show

¹ In this article, I use the terms *emotions* and *feelings* interchangeably, as is typical in casual conversation. However, as pastoral theologian William Kondrath helpfully points out, current neurological research differentiates the two: “*feelings* are what arise as the brain interprets emotions, which are the body’s complex physical reactions to external stimuli.” William M. Kondrath, *Facing Feelings in Faith Communities* (Herndon, Virg.: The Alban Institute, 2013), 11, emphasis in original.

² Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985), 197.

that anxiety—defined as a basic “sense of threat” to the self³—is a typical human response to difference. This understanding of anxiety makes it possible to see conflict as a predictable, and even potentially useful, consequence of relating to diverse others within the context of religious community.

However, FST does not adequately attend to the importance of expressing feelings nonreactively within the context of organizational dynamics, tending instead to emphasize cognitive patterns and behavioral choices. As a corrective to this limitation within family systems theory, recent church leadership literature shifts the focus from cognitive decision-making to the importance of feelings within faith communities. Powerful affective responses to conflict are not, in and of themselves, problematic. In fact, such responses are a natural part of being human and serve as important signals about what is happening in a relationship or a community. *Vulnerability to difference* then becomes a way of theologically framing a vision of the body of Christ characterized by deep relational connection rather than reactive needs for sameness or emotional distance. The essay concludes with practical suggestions for congregations that are facing divisive conflict. These suggestions include acknowledging difference and anxiety, cultivating emotionally connected leaders, and providing opportunities for all voices to be heard.

Anxiety and Emotions

As noted above, Family Systems Theory (FST) is a particularly useful tool for analyzing conflict because of its close attention to emotional dynamics like anxiety and reactivity. This section describes both the benefits and the limitations of FST frameworks, and explores additional church leadership resources for wisdom about addressing feelings more effectively in communities of faith.

³ Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 42.

Family Systems Theory: Anxiety and Emotional Reactivity

The term *family systems theory* refers to a way of thinking about family and organizational dynamics that was originally developed by psychiatrist Murray Bowen.⁴ According to this theory, family networks operate as dynamic wholes, with individual members contributing to and being affected by the functioning of the larger system. The theory assumes that relationships are a primary source of human health and struggle, and that the health or ill health of a system also applies to its individual members. Family systems theory thus de-emphasizes individual personality as the sole cause of problems, and instead sees individual troubles primarily as a result of system dynamics. In other words, problems are reactions to changes in the system. Such changes disturb the system's usual sense of equilibrium, or homeostasis.⁵ When this disturbance happens, members of the system become anxious and frequently react with unhealthy behaviors such as withdrawal, emotional outbursts, or aggression. These behaviors are understood as symptoms of the more fundamental anxiety that is circulating throughout the family system.

Within family systems theory, *anxiety* is defined as a "sense of threat" experienced by individuals and by the systems of which they are a part.⁶ This sense of threat appears in two distinct forms: acute and chronic. Acute anxiety is what people typically experience in response to a specific crisis such as a severe illness, the loss of a job, or a house fire. Once the immediate crisis has passed, individuals feel less acutely anxious and are able to begin dealing with the aftermath of the event. Chronic anxiety, by contrast, persists across time and develops in response to imagined threats. In this sense, chronic anxiety is a diffuse sense of

⁴ See, for example, Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1978); Michael E. Kerr and Murray Bowen, *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988).

⁵ Friedman, 23.

⁶ Richardson, 42.

dis-ease, which may manifest itself in a general sense of not feeling safe in the world.⁷

Generally speaking, then, acute anxiety is a natural and automatic response to a threat. When we are truly in danger, anxiety can make us more alert and ready to respond to the threat, thus increasing our chances for self-preservation.⁸ But as church consultant and systems expert Peter Steinke notes, “If intense and prolonged, anxiety has a strangling effect, depleting people’s energy, disturbing their thinking, and dividing their loyalties.”⁹ Steinke further explains that because chronic anxiety develops in response to no specific threat, “Any issue, topic, or circumstance can provoke chronically anxious people.”¹⁰ For this reason, organizational systems with high levels of chronic anxiety frequently experience ineffective or destructive patterns of relating and communicating.

According to family systems theory, the antidote to high levels of chronic anxiety is differentiation. The theory assumes the existence of an “instinctually rooted life force” called individuality that drives each person to become “an emotionally separate person, an individual with the ability to think, feel, and act for himself.”¹¹ Differentiation, then, is the process by which individuals learn to define themselves and move toward achieving the goals to which they are led by the force of individuality. The life force of individuality is balanced by the life force of togetherness, which “propels child and family to remain emotionally connected and to operate in reaction to one another.”¹²

Family systems theory posits that, ideally, the life forces of individuality and togetherness remain in equilibrium, so that persons can clearly define their selves while simultaneously remaining connected to important others.

⁷ Richardson, 43.

⁸ Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Herndon, Virg.: The Alban Institute, 2006), 3.

⁹ Steinke, 3.

¹⁰ Steinke, 10.

¹¹ Kerr and Bowen, 95.

¹² Kerr and Bowen, 95.

Yet, FST also recognizes that for most people, the pull toward togetherness is much stronger than the pull toward individuality, which makes differentiation the key developmental challenge to which persons must respond. In the process of differentiating, individuals develop the ability to remain calm in the midst of anxious systems and to take full responsibility for their own thoughts, feelings, and actions.

The concept of *reactivity* holds the key for understanding the relationship between systemic anxiety and encounters with difference. Within family systems theory, reactivity refers to “the emotional expression of people’s sense of threat.”¹³ In his text *Creating a Healthier Church*, pastoral counselor Ronald W. Richardson explains that whenever “significant, anxiety-stirring difference” is discovered within important relationships, “most people decide that the fault lies with the other person.”¹⁴ When this happens, individuals become “reactively focused on the other as the source of their own anxious discomfort”¹⁵ and begin to engage in behaviors designed to distance themselves from the anxiety they are feeling. Such reactivity is rooted in the belief that “closeness is sameness”¹⁶; consequently, any person or idea that deviates from this standard of sameness appears threatening. Thus, the stronger this belief is in a given system, the more anxiety will rise when important differences are encountered within that system. As a result, chronically anxious systems typically have more difficulty containing differences and conflict than do systems with lower levels of chronic anxiety.¹⁷

It is also important to note that family systems theory understands reactivity to refer not to the intensity or quality

¹³ Richardson, 91.

¹⁴ Richardson, 92.

¹⁵ Richardson, 92.

¹⁶ Richardson, 92.

¹⁷ See, for example, Hunsinger and Latini’s description of well-differentiated individuals and systems. Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger and Theresa F. Latini, *Transforming Church Conflict: Compassionate Leadership in Action* (Louisville, Ken.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 167–168.

of a particular emotional response, but rather to the degree to which that response is designed to distance from or avoid dealing with a sense of threat (anxiety). While it is true that reactivity often takes the form of aggressive, abusive, or violent behavior, it can also take the form of passive behavior such as compliance or emotional distancing.¹⁸ What makes a behavior reactive, then, is not the particular form it takes, but rather its primary goal of “distancing and not dealing directly with the experience of threat.”¹⁹ Thus, reactivity involves not dealing openly and clearly with the affective content (anxiety/fear) that lies behind the response. When persons in a community are stuck in a place of emotional reactivity, they are unable to attend to their own anxiety or to the powerful emotions that accompany it. As a result, the community’s ability to maintain healthy relationships breaks down.

Attending Adequately to Feelings: A Challenge to Family Systems Theory

The previous section has demonstrated the value of employing a family systems framework for understanding conflict; by identifying anxiety as the most basic and powerful force within relationships and organizations, FST acknowledges the emotional core of conflict that emerges in response to differences within faith communities. Family systems theory also provides helpful behavioral descriptions—such as reactivity—with which to understand the primary emotional dynamics that occur when individuals and systems experience a sense of threat. The theory’s focus on differentiation is also instructive for leaders in faith communities, who can learn how to develop a non-anxious presence in the midst of conflict and maintain a separate sense of self within the context of relationships. In short, family systems theory helps us to see that, although the intellectual and theological contents of disagreements within congregations are important, the instinctual emotional

¹⁸ Richardson, 93–96.

¹⁹ Richardson, 93.

processes of anxiety and reactivity frequently take over such disagreements and make it difficult for people to hear or relate to one another well. Otherwise, members of faith communities would be able simply to argue their points dispassionately, without developing any affective responses to the conversation at all.

However, the absence of affective response to conflict is not what communities of faith should be striving to accomplish. Pastoral theologian William Kondrath notes that learning and transformation within individuals and communities include three distinct dimensions: the cognitive (thoughts and beliefs), the behavioral (actions), and the affective (feelings).²⁰ All three of these dimensions interact in complex ways, with some being more primary for particular individuals than others. Yet, even though all of these dimensions are central to the nature of human beings, “North American society, heavily shaped by dominant white, heterosexual, masculine views, favors the cognitive and behavioral dimensions. Value is placed on *right* thinking and *right* action.”²¹ Kondrath further observes that within the dominant culture, feelings are devalued as unimportant or irrational: “People who use their feelings to make a decision . . . are said to be ‘swayed by their feelings.’”²² Pastoral theologians Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger and Theresa Latini make a similar observation about religious thinkers and leaders—particularly within the mainline Protestant tradition—who also tend disproportionately to represent dominant cultural groups: “It has also been our experience that theologians and church leaders often elevate thought over emotion, denigrating the expression of feeling in the context of difficult conversations and debate.”²³

Given this bias toward cognitive and behavioral factors in achieving transformation, it is perhaps not surprising that family systems theory often displays many of these same prejudices. After all, the theory was created (at least in its

²⁰ Kondrath, 15.

²¹ Kondrath, 17, emphasis in original.

²² Kondrath, 17.

²³ Hunsinger and Latini, 42.

initial iterations) by the same culturally dominant groups that Kondrath, Hunsinger, and Latini mention. In my own review of congregational leadership literature that uses FST as its primary theoretical framework, I have found that it does not typically engage the *nonreactive expression of feelings* as a key component of functioning well inside a system. These resources tend to discuss emotional responses primarily in terms of reactivity, and often imply that such responses should be managed through more cognitive approaches. As the above discussion of family systems theory has already shown, reactivity—which puts emotional distance between individuals and their own experience of threat—is not helpful and tends to make matters worse. Yet, in setting up the contrast between feeling and thinking in this way, the authors of these leadership resources seem to leave little room for the nonreactive expression of feelings as part of the healing and reconciliation that could take place in the midst of divisive differences.

In fact, some of these resources suggest a sharp dichotomy between thinking and feeling, with a clear value placed on cognitive decision-making. For example, in *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*, Peter Steinke writes, “Emotional processes are driven by automatic behaviors. Sometimes, instead of acting rationally, we flare up in anger or pull back in fear. At other times, we maintain our composure and retain our ability to think things through.”²⁴ Pastor and author Arthur Paul Boers draws the contrast between thinking and feeling even more starkly: “Emotions should not be mistaken for facts. Emotions are important, but decisions need to be based ultimately on intellect.”²⁵ Likewise, Ronald Richardson argues that “Groups of people, congregations, committees, and copastors get into greater emotional difficulty and confusion when they are not able to achieve a more thoughtful, objective stance within the

²⁴ Steinke, 110.

²⁵ Arthur Paul Boers, *Never Call Them Jerks: Healthy Responses to Difficult Behavior* (Herndon, Virg.: The Alban Institute, 1999), 106.

emotional system.”²⁶ Richardson further claims that “As fusion [the antithesis of differentiation] increases within a congregation, members increasingly confuse feelings and fact . . . The subjective feeling world is more dominant in fused congregations.”²⁷ Within the family systems framework, *fusion* denotes a lower level of maturity; thus, Richardson’s claim suggests that strong feelings impede, rather than contribute to, individual and communal growth.

Other church leadership resources draw the dichotomy between thinking and feeling less stridently, but they still seem to prioritize thinking over feeling. For instance, in *Extraordinary Leadership: Thinking Systems, Making a Difference*, a text addressed specifically to congregational leaders, psychiatrist Roberta M. Gilbert writes, “In every relationship, no matter how emotionally mature, emotions are continuously signaled and received nonverbally . . . But, thoughtful verbal communication is an important hallmark of high level relationships . . . *Communication in the best relationships becomes a self-defining give and take of ideas.*”²⁸ Here, Gilbert appears to assign a lower value to emotions and the expression of feelings and a higher value to the exchange of ideas.

Gilbert makes the same point even more dramatically in her earlier text, *Extraordinary Relationships: A New Way of Thinking About Human Interactions*: “If relationships are the court of first resort for feelings, the relationships most often run into trouble. Perhaps feelings are best processed by the individual in his or her own head.”²⁹ Building on this concept, Gilbert recommends that in order to maintain a well-differentiated position within a system, individuals should process feelings by observing their emotional state, thinking about that observation, and then acting on those

²⁶ Richardson, 85.

²⁷ Richardson, 84.

²⁸ Roberta M. Gilbert, *Extraordinary Leadership: Thinking Systems, Making a Difference* (Falls Church, Virg.: Leading Systems Press, 2006), 84–85, emphasis in original.

²⁹ Roberta M. Gilbert, *Extraordinary Relationships: A New Way of Thinking About Human Interactions* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1992), 133.

thoughts.³⁰ Again, here we see a prioritizing of cognitive and behavioral responses over the expression of feelings, which Gilbert suggests is often problematic in the context of organizational relationships. This tendency in the literature to separate thinking from feeling and place a higher value on cognitive responses seems unusual, given FST's frequent emphasis on the importance of leaders remaining intimately connected to all parts of a given system. As Kondrath notes, a crucial part of this connection involves establishing "affective transparency" among all parties.³¹ In other words, without the clear and open expression of feelings within a system, it is difficult to imagine how intimacy or trust might be established.

Interestingly, many of these same FST-based leadership texts already include conceptual resources for imagining how the expression of feelings might fit into a healthier congregational response to conflict: namely, the idea that differentiation of self involves learning how to distinguish thinking from feeling, so that one can act from either position. In *Extraordinary Leadership*, for example, Gilbert explains that:

The levels of functioning are similar to rungs of a ladder that go between two columns made up of emotions and intellect. At the bottom of the scale emotions and intellect are fused . . . In the middle, less so and further along, there is more and more choice about whether one is in emotions or intellect.³²

Similarly, Richardson argues that "better differentiated people are free to act from either a thinking or a feeling position."³³ Indeed, much of the FST-based leadership literature tends to define differentiation as the ability to define one's own beliefs, values, and feelings, even in the face of pressure from the system. It seems reasonable to assume, then, that part of the process of differentiation would include developing the ability to express one's own

³⁰ Gilbert, *Extraordinary Relationships*, 134–135.

³¹ Kondrath, 6.

³² Gilbert, *Extraordinary Leadership*, 66–67.

³³ Richardson, 109.

feelings, nonreactively, as one way of remaining connected to all parts of the system, and of fostering the kind of “connection, unity, intimacy, and mutual understanding”³⁴ that forms the hallmarks of healthy relationships. However, FST-based leadership resources typically pay little attention to how the affective dimensions of healthy relationships are to be explored, focusing instead on clear thinking and effective action.

In contrast, I suggest that communities of faith can become healthier if they learn to acknowledge the affective root of what is happening in conflict, and how feelings interact with cognitive and behavioral patterns. Pastoral theologian William Kondrath’s notion of *affective competence*—defined as “responding appropriately in groups with full use of the messages that come to us in our feelings”—proves especially helpful at this juncture.³⁵ According to Kondrath, communities of faith function best when they strive not just for cognitive and behavioral competence, but also for affective competence among all community members. When congregants are intentional about this work, the entire community experiences positive effects: “A congregation benefits when its members become more skilled in recognizing their own feelings and the feelings of the other members. In such a community, communication is more direct and effective. Meetings run more smoothly. The causes and dimensions of conflict are more identifiable and thus more appropriately engaged.”³⁶

This concept of affective competence proves to be particularly helpful because it lends more descriptive shape to the idea of non-anxious or nonreactive leadership found in family systems literature. Instead of implying that non-anxious leadership requires suppressing feelings in order to prioritize thinking, affective competence makes room for leaders to engage their own feelings honestly as a key part of functioning well inside an emotional system. Yet, such affective competence can flourish only if congregations first

³⁴ Richardson, 108.

³⁵ Kondrath, 18.

³⁶ Kondrath, 149–150.

acknowledge the importance of feelings in their life together. Thus, the next section explores three distinct roles that feelings play within relationships and communities: acting as signals about the environment, communicating needs, and connecting individuals with one another.

Feelings as Important Signals

The previous section has shown that many FST-based leadership resources for congregations do not offer much sustained reflection on what role the honest expression of feelings might play in faith communities that are experiencing anxiety in response to difference and conflict. In most of these resources, the terms *emotions* and *feelings* are interpreted within the context of automatic reactivity, and thus seen as less healthy than the cognitive or behavioral dimensions of decision-making. Although these texts occasionally hint that higher levels of differentiation permit individuals to act from “either a thinking or a feeling position,”³⁷ they fail to expand upon what it might look like to respond from a feeling position in ways that fit the definitions of health as established in these works. In other words, FST is a management tool for fields of emotions, and management occurs through the thought process. Even so, this literature makes a convincing case that for congregational systems to function optimally, all their individual parts must find ways to stay in close connection. To that end, in this section I examine recent writings in the areas of congregational leadership that more fully acknowledge the importance of feelings within communities of faith, which demonstrates the important roles that emotions play as signals about human environments, needs, and relationships.

In his recent work *Facing Feelings in Faith Communities*, William Kondrath notes that in contemporary U.S. culture, feelings are often devalued in relationship to thoughts and actions. Often, this stance is expressed through sayings such

³⁷ Richardson, 109.

as “feelings are not facts.”³⁸ Although this statement may well be true in a certain sense, it also implies that feelings have no connection to outside reality, that somehow feelings are purely internal states contained within individuals. In contrast to such a view, Kondrath offers the more helpful notion of congruence between feelings and the stimuli that produce them.³⁹ Kondrath explains that emotions serve an important function within human life: they provide us with information, in the form of messages, about the environment around us. He writes, “Feelings give us clues about what we need in a particular situation When a feeling is congruent with the stimulus that evoked it, we get a clear message about what is needed. In this way there is something *right* about feelings.”⁴⁰ In this sense, feelings are signals about what is happening around us and how we are already responding physiologically to those events.

Kondrath also notes that depending on what the stimulus is, the message we receive from our feelings might vary. In the case of fear, for example, the message we receive is “I am in danger”; in the case of anger, the message we receive is “I have been violated,” or “My expectations have been shattered.”⁴¹ In *Transforming Church Conflict: Compassionate Leadership in Action*, Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger and Theresa Latini state this connection between feelings and needs even more strongly: “Feelings are the gateway to connecting with the fullness of our needs and others’ needs....To put it another way, our needs are the source and cause of our feelings.”⁴² Again, making this connection clear is helpful because it serves as a reminder that feelings are not simply internal phenomena that are disconnected from reality. Instead, feelings serve as important communicators about human needs. As Hunsinger and Latini emphasize, becoming aware of our needs (through experiencing feelings) allows us to connect

³⁸ Kondrath, 19.

³⁹ Kondrath, 17.

⁴⁰ Kondrath, 18, emphasis in original.

⁴¹ Kondrath, 29, 45.

⁴² Hunsinger and Latini, 48.

with their “life-giving quality,” which helps us and others flourish.⁴³

Hunsinger and Latini further explain that all human needs can be organized into a few universal categories; one of these is the need for connection.⁴⁴ I highlight this need here because it points to yet another way in which feelings are vital to the life and health of a faith community: Emotions serve as a means of connecting human beings to one another, even when they may express “negative” emotions such as anger, fear, or sadness.⁴⁵ In fact, such negative feelings often serve as a signal that something has gone wrong in our relationships or in our community. The feeling of anger is particularly useful in this regard. Kondrath notes, for example, that “Anger is the affective clue that we are disconnected from God, from ourselves, from right relationship with other people.”⁴⁶ Pastoral theologian Barbara McClure goes even further, arguing that emotions can also serve as signals that something is not right in our social or cultural environment, motivating us to seek justice for ourselves or others:

Anger, for example, can be a way of recognizing that one is endangered by a situation and a socially adequate analysis of anger can motivate a positively transformative process . . . In other words, negative emotions can be considered a register of something

⁴³ Hunsinger and Latini, 48.

⁴⁴ Hunsinger and Latini, 24. The categories of needs that Hunsinger and Latini present in this section of their text are based on the resources of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), the primary organizing framework they use in this work.

⁴⁵ I intentionally put the word *negative* in quotations here to denote that this is how many people understand such feelings. To many people, anger, fear, and sadness feel bad, so these emotions are categorized as negative. However, the position I take in this article is that feelings, in and of themselves, are neither good nor bad, but rather serve to communicate particular things about the environment or about human relationships. How individuals choose to respond to their feelings can be positive or negative, but the feelings themselves are not necessarily good or bad.

⁴⁶ Kondrath, 45.

wrong, not just within our selves, but with our social and institutional contexts as well.⁴⁷

Yet, the intensity of feelings often causes individuals to respond in reactive ways, which are designed to distance themselves from anxiety rather than dealing openly with the affective dimensions of a situation. As family systems theory helpfully explains, when this reactivity happens, interpersonal and systemic relationships become stuck in unhealthy patterns, leaving those involved less able to experience true connection. Hunsinger and Latini put it this way: “Emotional reactivity, regardless of the form it takes, inhibits authentic encounter among persons within a system.”⁴⁸ In other words, when individuals within a system cannot find ways to meet their needs for connection with one another, the entire community suffers. And, as we have seen, feelings are one of the primary ways that human beings experience and express their needs. Thus, in faith communities where individuals cannot or will not express their feelings openly and nonreactively, the quality of relationships tends to decline.

Vulnerability to Difference: A Theological Framework for Conflict in Congregations

Given the importance of feelings as signals about our environment, our needs, and our relationships, any attempt to reflect theologically on conflict in faith communities must attend carefully to this dimension of human life. To do so, we need a theological framework that simultaneously acknowledges the strong (and often negative display of) emotions that arise in response to difference and conflict, and the potentially creative and healing role of feelings in connecting community members to one another. Such a framework requires a clear vision of the body of Christ as a place where people can be known in all of their uniqueness

⁴⁷ Barbara J. McClure, “The Social Construction of Emotions: A New Direction in the Pastoral Work of Healing,” *Pastoral Psychology* 59(6) (2010): 807.

⁴⁸ Hunsinger and Latini, 167.

and valued for the various ways in which they contribute to the whole. Embracing this vision means accepting that communities of faith will experience conflict because individuals have different needs, aims, and desires, which cannot always be easily reconciled. Still, God calls us to work toward the establishment of inclusive, honest congregations—not simply as a means to meeting human relational needs, but because it is our vocation as a Christian people to create spaces where all can be welcomed and deeply known.

The first step in framing this theological perspective is to acknowledge that differences have always existed within Christian communities and that these differences are hallmarks of God's creative power. The Church has, from its very birth, included a diversity of outlooks—a diversity created by God's abundant Spirit, which has been poured out and enacted through a multiplicity of beliefs and practices that ultimately enrich the Church as a whole.⁴⁹ Such a vision of the Church lends theological weight to the notion of diversity as a gift: because God created the world in all its diversity, an encounter with difference signals an encounter with a unique part of God's creation. From this perspective, then, the differences that inevitably exist within congregations serve a vital purpose: they empower the Church to incarnate its identity as the body of Christ. As theologian John R. Franke argues, God has created and sustained this complex identity for the purpose of doing God's work in the world: "The diversity of the Christian faith is not, as some approaches to church and theology might seem to suggest, a problem that needs to be overcome. Instead, this diversity is part of the divine design and intention for the church as the image of God and the body of Christ in the world."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ See Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor*, ed. William R. Burrows, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008), 39.

⁵⁰ John R. Franke, *Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Truth*, ed. Tony Jones, Living Theology Series (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2009), 7–8.

Yet, as we have seen, encounters with difference in the context of faith communities often produce intense anxiety and reactive responses, rooted in a sense of threat to the self. In order to create communities of faith where differences can be embraced, further theological reframing is needed. Here, I propose vulnerability to difference as key to the creation of communities that strive to remain connected even in the midst of anxiety-producing conflict. The concept of vulnerability seems appropriate here because it points to the ability to be harmed and the ability to be intimate.⁵¹ Most people would agree that in order to establish intimacy in relationships, vulnerability is crucial. Such vulnerability provides a space for each person to be fully known in all of his or her uniqueness, but still closely connected with others. Yet vulnerability also opens us up to all of the ways that those with whom we are in relationship may hurt or disappoint us.

Paradoxically, though, encountering difference is itself a precondition of relationship, because relationship cannot exist without distinctions. Put simply, relating to another person or creature requires that the other be different from oneself. In creating the world, God chose to enter into intimate relationship with difference; likewise, for God to love the world, the world must be—in some significant sense—distinguishable from God's own being. This vulnerability to difference, modeled by God in creation and in God's continuing relationship with the world, also holds the key to human connection and community. Instead of assuming sameness, vulnerability steps back and tries to see the other for who he or she truly is. Vulnerability thus requires a willingness to be hurt, challenged, or changed by the other. It also requires a willingness to endure the anxiety produced by difference, which can threaten our perceptions that our own ways of living and thinking might not be the only right ways. Vulnerability to difference, therefore, not

⁵¹ The reflections on vulnerability presented in this section have been deeply influenced by the work of contemporary theologian Thomas E. Reynolds, especially his text *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2008).

only describes human beings' capacity to suffer, but also highlights myriad ways in which humans are dependent upon and connected with one another. In fact, the human condition that allows us to be hurt by one another is the same condition that makes intimacy and interdependence possible. If we avoid vulnerability with others, we may protect ourselves from being hurt, but in so doing we also prevent ourselves from being truly known.

Any discussion of vulnerability must also attend to emotions, because they play a key role in how human beings experience the richness of relationships with one another. As we have seen, feelings serve as signals about what is happening in relationships and communities, and they also provide the means by which people connect to one another in those contexts. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine feeling deeply connected in relationships or communities that normalize or even value emotional distance. Further, the expression of feelings is a primary way of giving voice to our most profound needs. When we can do this in the context of community, we allow ourselves to be more fully and deeply known. This knowing is the heart of the relationality that God established at creation and toward which God continues to call us.

Admittedly, allowing oneself to be known in this way in the midst of a faith community feels too dangerous at times and often leads members of congregations to avoid such vulnerability with one another. Instead of seeking to eliminate this kind of vulnerability, however, faith communities are called to recognize it as the key to true relationship and intimacy. This call actually comes in the form of a commandment, when Jesus instructs his followers to "love your neighbor as yourself."⁵² These loving relationships then contribute to the deep relationality experienced throughout the community of faith. Thus, it is no longer adequate simply to acknowledge and tolerate the existence of others in Christian community. Instead, God calls us to embrace one another as brothers and sisters in

⁵² Mark 12:31 (New Revised Standard Version).

Christ, in a way that “receives the other’s difference as contributive, valuable, and good.”⁵³

As members of the body of Christ, we are called to love one another in ways that make us vulnerable to each other’s differences. Consequently, trying to erase the conditions that lead to vulnerability actually erases the conditions that create and define the Christian community. Christ’s body is made up of many different parts, all of which are required for the body to function properly. Celebrating differences within individual faith communities affirms that God intentionally created all the parts of the body to function differently. In other words, God never intended that all parts of the body would eventually become the same. Of course, this idea has its origin in the words of Scripture, which offers a powerful image of the importance of diversity among the parts of Christ’s body: “If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be?”⁵⁴

This New Testament image has profound implications for a discussion of congregational conflict, because it allows us to shift our understanding of what actually poses the greatest threat to the body’s continued cohesion. Perhaps what damages Christ’s body is not difference or conflict per se, but rather the attempt to erase difference—difference which is, by definition, a fundamental aspect of human relationship and Christian community. What breaks Christ’s body is the attempt to make all of its parts look exactly the same. Thus, in this way of thinking, difference represents not only a reality with which congregations must cope, but an inherent good that, when eliminated from their common life together, harms churches’ ability to faithfully incarnate Christ’s body in the world.

Instead of resisting vulnerability to difference, then, Christians are called to embrace it and to remain open to

⁵³ Thomas E. Reynolds, *The Broken Whole: Philosophical Steps Toward a Theology of Global Solidarity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 189.

⁵⁴ I Cor. 12:17–19 (New Revised Standard Version).

true relationship with one another, even in the midst of serious disagreements and complex emotions. Yet, bringing such a vision to fruition is no easy task. As always, the question remains: *How?* How, exactly, can churches and their leaders embrace vulnerability to difference, even as they acknowledge its anxiety-producing qualities? The final section of this essay suggests three particular practices that might help communities of faith navigate the challenges of coping with conflict while remaining emotionally connected.

Implications for Practice

Because encounters with difference in congregations frequently raise anxiety and precipitate destructive reactions, this section focuses on leadership approaches designed to soothe anxiety and facilitate healing and transformation in faith communities.

Acknowledge Difference and Anxiety

This essay began by sketching the ways in which individuals and groups respond unhelpfully to the anxiety produced by encounters with difference. Such anxiety is a typical human response to the experience of threat; as such, it is not something that can ever be completely eliminated from group life. However, how congregations respond to this anxiety has significant implications for whether conflict in their midst proves to be creative or destructive. The years I have spent studying the topic of church conflict have convinced me that most faith communities tend to avoid acknowledging the differences in their midst—particularly if those differences are about important things. These kinds of unacknowledged differences produce anxiety among church members, who frequently respond in one of two ways: either by trying to pretend that the differences do not matter or by trying to convert others to one's point of view so that the group will share a high level of sameness on important issues. In either case, the differences are not fully acknowledged, and as a result, the anxiety is never fully relieved. Instead, individuals and groups simply cover up the underlying anxiety, and in many cases, they make this anxiety

worse through their attempts to ignore or eradicate the real differences that exist among them.

In light of this observation, the first step for congregations in conflict is to acknowledge the differences in their midst, as well as the anxiety that frequently accompanies those differences. At first glance, this might seem like an unusual suggestion. After all, if a congregation is in conflict, don't members already know that differences of opinion exist within the group? The answer to this question is both yes and no. Obviously, in a situation of conflict, people are aware that a disagreement is afoot. Yet, in such situations, individuals often believe that there is only one solution to the problem, or one right way to think or believe; thus, their job is to convince those on the other side to change their minds. This way of dealing with conflict refuses to acknowledge the real differences within a faith community because it assumes that, ultimately, the goal is for everyone to start thinking the same way about a problem or an issue. This reaction is a standard of "closeness is sameness," and as such, it is not the most effective way of handling conflict within a group. Thus, I suggest that congregations start by intentionally acknowledging the important distinctions that exist in their midst.

Cultivate Emotionally Connected Leaders

Acknowledging difference and anxiety within a congregational system requires a basic element, which now invites additional reflection—namely, the presence of emotionally connected leaders in the community of faith. Numerous practical resources are available to help congregations develop such leadership. It is not my intention to duplicate those efforts here. However, in light of the crucial role that leaders play in the shape of congregational conflict, it is worth making a few specific suggestions about what leaders can do to contribute to healing in conflicted organizations.

The first thing leaders can do is to remain as nonreactive as possible in the midst of conflict—even conflict that is highly volatile. This suggestion may seem counterintuitive,

because for many people the term *nonreactive* connotes an image of emotional passivity or even the complete absence of emotion. Indeed, in some contexts, leaders believe that it is their job to remain emotionally expressionless as a means of controlling a tense situation.⁵⁵ Here, though, it is important to recall how reactivity is defined within family systems theory—namely, as an emotional response that is designed to distance a person from an experience of threat. As noted earlier in this essay, reactivity may include a wide range of responses, including compliance, rebelliousness, power struggles, or emotional distancing.⁵⁶ Thus, in exhorting congregational leaders to remain nonreactive in the face of conflict, I am not suggesting that they hide their emotions or try to project a sense of emotional detachment (in fact, this emotional control would be an example of reactivity).

Instead, leaders in conflicted congregations can work on becoming emotionally transparent in ways that are nonreactive in nature—that is, ways that deal openly with the anxiety at hand rather than burying the conflict or distancing themselves from it. This task is difficult. As many family systems theorists have noted, the ability to remain nonreactive in the face of intense anxiety is acquired over time, through the process of differentiation. In other words, it might not always be possible to decide, in the heat of the moment, to differentiate. Yet, if we recall the definition of *differentiation* as a leader's capacity to “maintain a position and still stay in touch,”⁵⁷ we begin to see glimpses of ways in which church leaders might begin to develop practices that could lead them down the path toward differentiation, even in the midst of difficult situations.

The presence of anxiety frequently causes people to take actions designed to avoid or eliminate the anxiety through reactive behaviors. For many pastoral leaders, the avoidance

⁵⁵ I am grateful to my colleague, Mark Lau Branson, for sharing this observation during a discussion of this paper at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Academy of Religious Leadership.

⁵⁶ Richardson, 93–97.

⁵⁷ Friedman, 230.

of conflict tends to be the default mode of operating. As such, many ministers and congregational leaders prefer to ignore a problem (rather than deal with the anxiety it generates) until it can no longer be ignored. In fact, one of the common mistakes that pastoral and lay leaders make in such situations is the failure to stay in touch with all parts of the congregational system. Such a failure allows others in the community to convince themselves that leaders do not care about their views, and as a result they may no longer be willing to listen to what leaders have to say.

Instead of succumbing to the temptation to ignore or avoid anxiety-producing situations, calm leaders can acknowledge individuals with different points of view and seek ways to connect with them. In practice, this might mean inviting persons to have one-on-one or small-group conversations with individual leaders. Or, it might simply mean designing a small-group process that ensures that all perspectives are heard and affirmed.⁵⁸ It is important to recall here that remaining connected across difference does not mean abdicating one's position in an attempt to restore peace to troubled relationships. Instead, it involves exhibiting a posture of differentiation—that is, claiming one's position clearly while also remaining connected with others.

Staying in touch with all parts of the system is a key way in which leaders can foster a deep sense of connection within their communities of faith. Yet, as this essay has argued, such connection typically cannot be achieved without emotional vulnerability. In fact, as we have seen, feelings serve to establish intimacy and trust in relationships, and also to alert us when something in the relational field has gone awry. What might it mean for leaders to stay connected to all parts of the system, not just in terms of communication, but also in terms of emotional relatedness? Here it is helpful to return to Kondrath's notion of affective

⁵⁸ Hearing and affirming all voices does not mean allowing individuals to bully others or to communicate in hurtful ways. The final section elaborates on the complexity of creating safe space for conversation within a congregation.

competence. Recall that Kondrath defines *affective competence* as “responding appropriately in groups with full use of the messages that come to us in our feelings.”⁵⁹ One way that congregational leaders can stay connected emotionally is to develop this kind of affective competence and model it for others in the faith community. For example, during a meeting a leader may sense discord. The leader can stop and say, “I am sensing _____ in the room. What is that about?” Another example would be for a leader to say, in the midst of a contentious conversation, “I’m getting angry.” This approach allows the leader to identify and clearly express his or her feelings before reaching a state of such heightened anxiety that he or she would feel compelled to respond reactively. This honesty and vulnerability are what Kondrath means by *affective competence*; affective competence is a skill that all leaders in faith communities need in order to develop healthy congregations.

Provide Opportunities for All Voices to Be Heard

One important way that leaders can simultaneously foster connection and acknowledge differences within faith communities is to provide everyone the opportunity to be heard. This kind of open, honest discussion helps to dispel the perception of unanimity on any particular issue, and it reveals the internal diversity and emotional complexity that is almost certain to exist in any community of faith. In other words, by allowing each person the opportunity to speak his or her mind in an environment that feels safe, the group facilitates the expression of differences and feelings in ways that are less threatening than the argumentative, adversarial model that is so frequently used in congregations.⁶⁰ Furthermore, creating a safe environment promotes the kind of healthy vulnerability within a community that is necessary for wholeness. As Hunsinger and Latini note, “When we

⁵⁹ Kondrath, 18.

⁶⁰ Some evidence even suggests that constructive conversation can ease anxiety in groups by functioning as a “fear-reducer” on a neuro-chemical level. See, for example, Bob Sitze, *Your Brain Goes to Church: Neuroscience and Congregational Life* (Herndon, Virg.: The Alban Institute, 2005), 112.

listen in this way, it shows our willingness not only to be known in our vulnerability but also to hear others with respect and care for their vulnerability.”⁶¹

Healthy conflict in communities of faith thus requires finding a way for all to have their voices heard so that differences and feelings can surface and be engaged in constructive ways. This admonition is not only a logistical one; it carries psychological and theological weight, as well. People become more anxious in the presence of difference because at a basic level, their sense of selfhood feels threatened. Thus, if congregants are effectively excluded from conversations about matters that are of personal and communal import, they feel as if their selves are not being fully recognized by the community of which they are a part.

When such exclusion happens, congregations literally and metaphorically fail to see the differences in their midst because they do not recognize them in any formal way. This feeling of being unseen in the midst of one’s own community can be extraordinarily painful for church members, who may come to believe that their personhood is not valued, and that ultimately their only option is to leave the community. Therefore, in situations of congregational conflict, it is crucial to provide ways to ensure that all church members have the opportunity to voice their concerns—not only as a means of practical problem solving, but as a way of formally recognizing the uniquely diverse collection of selves that make up any community of faith.

It is important to note here that providing space for all voices to be heard does not mean allowing people to act abusively toward one another. Unfortunately, the risk for such abuse in congregations is real; as a result, it is even more important that church leaders be well-differentiated and skilled at staying emotionally connected to all parts of the system. In some cases, such connected leadership will involve setting limits on some individuals’ actions and words so that others can be heard and respected. In fact, fostering an environment for honest conversation within a

⁶¹ Hunsinger and Latini, 16.

community of faith might initially involve additional conflict as these kinds of behavioral boundaries are negotiated within the group. Creating the kind of space that can adequately hold such conflict is a complex task, and again points to the need for skilled, affectively competent leaders within congregations.

Conclusion

Many congregations today are experiencing the pain of divisive conflicts in their midst. Consequently, many congregational leaders find themselves struggling to help their faith communities navigate the anxiety that lies at the root of such conflicts and to engage with difference in healthier ways. More adequate emotional reflection and expression represents one important way forward for conflicted congregations and their leaders. To this end, I offer a theological understanding of vulnerability to difference as central to the Church's ability to live into its identity as the body of Christ. This essay concludes with three concrete recommendations for congregations in conflict: to acknowledge difference and anxiety, to cultivate emotionally connected leaders, and to provide opportunities for all voices to be heard. By attending more closely to anxiety and other emotions, congregations and their leaders can create environments of greater affective transparency and relational stability, thereby becoming stronger and more vital communities of faith.

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