Twenty Observations about Troubled Congregations

By Peter L. Steinke

I have worked with troubled churches for 20 years. I never cease to learn from these experiences. The list below includes some of what I have learned about congregations in times of conflict.

1. Most people are interested in relieving their own anxiety rather than managing the crisis or planning for a clear direction. Their primary goal is anxiety reduction, not congregational renewal.
2. Under certain conditions, anxiety is neutral. As much as possible, effective leaders normalize anxiety. Considering what is happening, anxiety's presence is what we would expect. By normalizing, people will not automatically think anxiety exists because the community is flawed.
3. If anxiety is high, people lose their capacity to be self-reflective. They look outward, not at themselves. Self-awareness is dim, and the ability to identify with the life processes of others is impaired.
4. Peace is often preferred over justice. Congregational members can resist or be hesitant about taking stands, making decisions, or charting a course of action that would offend or upset the community. By placing a premium on togetherness, they play into the hands of the most dependent people who can threaten to incite disharmony as a way to receive what they want. When such superficial harmony--so-called "peace"--must prevail, then the pursuit of justice often is sacrificed and others who are involved become excused from responsibility.
5. If an individual becomes the lightning rod for people's anxiety and cannot extricate him- or herself from that position through self-differentiation (or the environment is so perverse that no one can escape from that position), trying to maintain his or her position or presence in the emotional system is unproductive as well as painful.

All disease processes are enabled. Viruses need host cells. Not all people designated by anxious systems as the patient are sick. The illness is in the interactive system, to which the following observations attest:

"All neuroses have accomplices" (Carl Jung). Anxiety not resolved in one relationship will be acted out in another relationship.
"Unless the leader has a degree of self-knowledge and self-understanding, there is the risk that he or she may use the organization to address his or her own neuroses" (Peter Senge et al.).8

7. The way we use information is an emotional phenomenon; what we hear and don't hear, what we remember, how we gather and exclude data are all connected to emotional processes. We gravitate toward information that coincides with our viewpoints and that promises to contribute to our survival.
8. The healing process for midrange to severely anxious congregations takes two to five years.
9. Losses (membership, offerings, attendance) will result no matter what choices are made. Most congregations regain their losses within two years.
10. Secrets--that is, hidden agendas and invisible loyalties--in most cases need to be brought to light. What about sin and evil? Expect it; expose it. To expose the demonic, name it (recall the story of Jesus and the demoniac in Mark 5).
11. Reactivity can issue from people who are leaders, erudite, talented, wealthy, well-educated, pious, charm-

ing, or normally calm folks. None of the above characteristics indicate that these individuals are mature emotionally.

12. Issues must be clearly identified and individuals must be challenged to act. No anxious congregation can handle more than three to five issues at a time. The issues must be condensed.

13. The sabotage of a process to deal with conflict should be expected. The usual saboteurs will be those who are losing control or not getting what they want from the process.

14. Murray Bowen claimed that all dyads are unstable. Therefore the basic molecule of all relationship systems is a triangle (the use of a third party to reduce tension between a twosome). A Swahili proverb reads: "When the elephants fight, it's the grass that gets crushed." Triangle formation is natural. Triangulation is another matter. It happens when the third party allows the original dyad to escape responsibility for its actions by assuming their anxiety and taking responsibility for them. Whenever a congregation brings in a third party, such as an intervention team, there is a triangle. Triangulation would occur if the team became anxious and felt responsible for the conflict's outcome.

15. Five styles of managing conflict have become commonplace: accommodating, problem solving, compromising, avoiding, and fighting. They are useful for recognizing general patterns of behavior under pressure. But they are not helpful when used as predictors—"Oh, Susan never takes a stand. She'll compromise on anything." People like Susan do not function in the same way in every context. At home Susan may compromise but at work she's quite a problem solver. Even in the same conflict, people may shift from one style to another. One may begin as a fighter, only with time to become an accommodator. Further, not all avoiders or problem solvers are equal. There's a range to their functioning. People's functioning is not determined by a style but by the context.

16. Recent research challenges the prevailing assumptions about conflict behavior being mutually exclusive. For example, direct fighting and problem solving are more effective in combination than they are in isolation. The continuous repetition of fighting, then problem solving, and then fighting is effective.

17. How the conflict is framed affects the behavior of those involved. When the conflict is conceptualized as cost or benefit, the participants' behavior changes. People become more involved if they anticipate losses as a result of the conflict than if they anticipate gains. Losses arouse greater emotional force. Researchers found that a prospect of loss led to less yielding behavior. Even when the opponent is about to suffer a loss, there is more cooperation from the other side than if the opponent enjoyed a profit.[9]

18. No emotional system will change unless the members of the system change how they interact with one another. Patterns of behavior tend toward rigidity. Conflict may be necessary to jolt and jar the shape of things in order to reshape the pattern. But the degree to which that change is positive or negative depends on the leadership present to respond to it.

19. The parties involved in a rift are in a poor position to settle the dispute if anxiety is high and rampant. Being too closely and emotionally involved in a circumstance, they will find it difficult to provide a fair overview.

Final or perfect solutions are not available. Conflict leaves things messy. The best solutions to insolvable problems are the approximate solutions--ones that prepare a system for new learning and a new beginning.