When congregations are stuck

by Peter L. Steinke in the April 7, 1999 issue

We often hear that two-thirds to three-fourths of American congregations are in decline or at a plateau with regard to membership. They are stuck where they are, immobilized by a flat growth line and in many cases by dwindling resources of time and money. Some of these churches are also stuck in old patterns of functioning and seldom think of changing unless some major event forces them to take a new look at their circumstances. Others are stuck in despair. Members are tired and discouraged. Perhaps their congregations are mere shadows of what they used to be. The "golden years" with the "golden pastor" have passed, and efforts to restore the glitter are futile. Or perhaps they've experienced conflict or trauma and are worn down. Or they're left without effective leadership, and are waiting for the ax of extinction to fall.

At the height of its golden years in the early 1980s, First Church had 600 members. During the past 15 years, however, that number has fallen to 340. The church is in a neighborhood that has become racially mixed, while the congregation remains mostly Anglo. The church is worried about its survival, yet can't seem to initiate anything new.

The church's stuckness shows up in two ways. The first sign is the members' decision to ask the past two pastors to leave after only three years because the pastors "didn't give many directions." They want the pastor to be responsible for everything and thus keep the members themselves free of responsibility.

A second symptom is the unusually close friendships among members. Many have stayed in the church from loyalty, or remain in this church because they were raised in it. They are afraid of any change that might affect their closeness. They want to keep things comfortable and to keep everyone happy. At the same time, they want the church to grow.

As long as the congregation continues to put all the responsibility on the pastor and refuses to make changes that might rock the boat, it will remain powerless. Its best hope is that the small group of members who want change will overcome their fear

of other members' reactions. A second hope is that they will call a pastor, or perhaps a truth-telling interim pastor, who will describe their situation to them clearly.

First Church exemplifies emotional stuckness. "Emotional" refers to all the processes that guide individuals automatically. Murry Bowen, in his reflections on family systems, addresses what is reactive in human behavior, what is instinctive in human responses, what bypasses thoughtfulness, and what is not chosen and planned. To refer to the emotional stuckness of a congregation is to refer to its automatic functioning--what it does as a matter of habit, for the sake of stability and familiarity. Like all living systems, congregations seek balance or homeostasis.

One key part of emotionality is anxiety, which is an automatic response to a threat. "Anxiety" is derived from a family of words that mean "constriction" and "nervousness," and is related to words such as throat, knot, collar, chain, strangle, choke and harness. Plato believed that the origin of the word comes from the experience of walking through a ravine which is ragged, overgrown and impassable.

Anxiety is a response of survival. Anything that threatens the system's safety is rejected, spurned or denied. We know from personal experience that anxiety limits functioning. It limits the number of options we can imagine and the full range of responses we might make.

Emotionally stuck congregations act automatically in an effort to survive, but their actions create as many problems as benefits. They set up emotional barriers that prevent or resist new ideas or fresh approaches. These barriers restrict congregations to the instinctive responses that are based only on past experiences.

Second Church, a congregation of 1,000 members, is struggling with a conflict between a staff person and a minister. The situation became polarized when members decided they had to support one leader or the other--and came to worship on Sunday wearing armbands to show which side they supported. The second group responded with armbands of a different color. Congregational morale dropped and attendance went down. The wearing of armbands was not only a symptom of the anxiety, but one of the things that perpetuated the anxiety.

We can illustrate the impasse of these emotional barriers by considering a problem the U.S. military encountered in Vietnam. During the war, American forces sent planes to bomb bridges in an attempt to prevent the Vietnamese from crossing rivers. But thousands of Vietnamese made it across the rivers anyway. When asked

how they moved so many people across, the Vietnamese replied, "Well, we built the bridges six inches under the water." No one builds bridges under water--except those with nimble enough minds to imagine doing so. The Vietnamese not only crossed rivers, they also traversed a way of thinking. Others are "stuck" in the assumption that bridges must sit above the water.

The emotionally stuck congregation overreacts to change, to what is different, or to anything that challenges its balance. It becomes a "closed" system, trapped behind emotional barriers of its own making, including the barrier of "togetherness forces." Edwin H. Friedman, author of *Generation to Generation*, refers to the "herd mentality." People are caught in imaginative gridlock and capitulate to groupthink. Because they cannot step outside of their own responses, they can't make conscious choices that would move them out of their situation with a new plan.

The interplay of two counterbalancing needs--separateness and closeness--is important in all significant relationships. Bowen contends that "togetherness" is biologically based, propelling an organism to be dependent on and to follow the directives of others. Connective forces give a system stability and coherence, what we often call "team spirit," "community" and the feeling of being "one big happy family." The downside of these forces is that they blunt the need to be separate and reflective, and to take an independent stand. In togetherness, one's functioning becomes more dependent on the support and acceptance of others. To dare to be different is to invite the togetherness forces to act with all their power to restore balance.

Emotionally stuck congregations are captives of this need for solidarity, sameness and comfort. They become susceptible to anxious togetherness and function automatically, doing what comes naturally rather than first stepping back and observing. The pressure to be a member of the club who does not rock the boat will override any attempt to change and risk tilting the system. And clergy who are unaware of the togetherness forces will find themselves caught in the system's emotional buzzsaw.

Third Church managed to step back from such a situation. The congregation had made two major decisions in 15 years, both of which had resulted in a loss of membership and income. A new pastor wanted to challenge the congregation, but realized that its members were paralyzed by these past "failures." They desperately needed to see some success. The pastor decided to have the congregation take on a

challenge. It raised $30,000 and involved 75 people to build a "blitz house," a Habitat for Humanity house that was put up in one week. This success freed the congregation from its inertia, and it was ready to make new plans.

In *Changing the Bully Who Rules the World*, Carol Bly warns that "the devil will come as a legion of genuinely nice people in a corporation."

No one wants to say unpleasant things such as "What we did last year will no longer work because the situation is different" or "What we felt proud of last year turns out, in retrospect, to have been a poor action. We need to talk to people who *know more than we know* to get a better perspective on our purpose here." Churches and other idealistic groups are especially vulnerable to this kind of groupthink because they think they must keep their meetings affectionate and high-spirited; they tend to make sure that there must be a group "high." Without it, the meeting won't be religiously correct. Hence we hear such language as "we were really excited" and "we felt such a oneness." But when the goal of feeling good from minute to minute is greater than the goal of being discerning about bad judgment, then a group is vulnerable to this aspect of groupthink.

Until such congregations can somehow be consciously awakened and jarred from automatic functioning, they will be stuck emotionally, and will seek only consensus, like-mindedness and tranquillity.

Another emotional barrier that puts a congregation at a disadvantage is a low threshold for pain. Friedman said that health is a matter of "inhibiting the inhibitors and stimulating the resources." Pain avoiders reverse this, preferring to "stimulate the inhibitors and inhibit the resources." Pain is a resource for change. It can provide new awareness and offer new choices. Congregations attuned to pain make use of its message. As Nancy Ammerman remarks in *Congregation and Community*, "Congregations unwilling to engage in conflict will not change." They stay stuck.

Reggie and Dot Mason are very active members at Fourth Church. They give amply of their time, money and energy. But both are sensitive to what is unfamiliar and different. Whenever changes are suggested or approved, Reggie sulks and Dot issues verbal attacks. Congregational leaders alter their plans to appease the Masons. This pattern has been going on for years. Everyone seeks to alleviate the Masons' discomfort. And if the Masons left or disappeared, there would eventually be another couple who would function as they do.

Congregations that protect their whiners, injustice collectors and supersensitive souls will never have the strength to move out of their emotional entrenchment. The mutuality of neediness and care-taking are functional states. The anxiously helpless and the anxiously helpful play into each other's hand. Anxiety connects people. By adapting to the weakest members--the recalcitrant, the passive-aggressive, those least likely to be responsible for themselves--congregations give them control. Dependent people are not about to take risks. They are emotionally stuck in their own neediness, and they are masters at keeping their helpers and lovers by their side.

Another feature of emotionally stuck congregations is a focus on conditions. They lament their circumstances; they blame others for what has happened. They stay riveted on what is happening "out there," and thus avoid paying attention to their own response to the conditions. They do not ask themselves, "What can we do to affect the situation?"

In *The Way of the Owl*, Frank Rivers writes:

> We don't see what we look *at*, we see what we look *for*. Expectation directs attention. We see what we expect to see. If you expect to see a friendly universe around you, you will probably see compassion, altruism and good humor. If you expect a hostile universe, you will probably see violence, selfishness and treachery. Anticipation distorts perception. Previewing distorts viewing.

Congregations that are focusing too much on their conditions expect to see problems, deficiencies and deficits. They engage in steady diagnosis of the difficulty (and one another). What they cannot do is to be actively involved in a system and still recognize the nature of that involvement both in its effects on themselves and on others. They are too anxious to be able to see clearly and to function differently.

I have worked with enough congregations to know that overfocus on conditions reinforces negative expectations and changes nothing. I recently met with two congregations in decline. Both are moving from being program-sized churches to being pastor-sized churches. Members of one congregation have had immense difficulty putting aside the memories of the days when they had more members and resources. They want to be the congregation they were two decades ago. They blame. They diagnose. They remain stuck. Now some people are leaving, going to

large churches to reclaim the golden years.

The other congregation is different. Its leaders realize that circumstances have changed. They know they have to operate with fewer resources; they know they have to plan their response to a new reality. Further, they know that their spirit is being tested, so they have made plans to celebrate as many things about their congregation as they can.

Congregations also perpetuate their stuckness by believing that the solution to their dilemma lies outside of their own powers. They are looking for a bone from a benefactor. Many of these congregations have been "managed" by a do-it-all pastor. The members acquiesced to the pastor's wishes and whims, giving the pastor what the pastor wanted. With that pastor gone, the remaining folks are still inclined to be passive. If the pattern persists, the stuckness prevails. Nothing interrupts their learned helplessness.

How can a congregation become one that adapts and changes? What factors make some congregations able to move beyond their emotional barriers while others stay trapped behind them and become part of organizational stagnation and death? Friedman claims that change seldom happens without two major elements--sufficient pain to motivate new behavior or direction and leaders who are uncommonly motivated (with emotional stamina and perseverance) to see change through.

Ammerman concurs with Friedman:

> The most clear common denominator is a strong pastor willing to weather conflict in the pursuit of a new way of doing the congregation's business. . . . Pastors with a clear sense of vision for the congregation's future can have an extraordinary impact through their religious authority. Because members grant them a certain legitimacy of office, pastors can sometimes lead congregations to do what the members' self-interest might predict was impossible.

The pastor must be able to engage in debate and conflict and to regulate and define himself well. But the key role played by pastoral leadership is paralleled by strong lay participation. "Also essential are responsive, imaginative and energetic lay persons willing to participate in the necessary processes of change."

Ammerman also posits a strong relationship between education and adaptation. In those congregations that became unstuck, whether or not they had high average levels of education, one could see "the work of well-educated key leaders and the teachableness of others." Hence the number of educated people is not as significant as having some educated leaders and some who can be taught.

Ammerman also notes how members can be too "stuck together":

> These small bands of survivors are often very attached to each other and willingly gather for Bible study and worship with their friends. In fact, their very commitment to each other and to the memories their congregation represents may be among the major obstacles preventing congregational adaptation to new circumstances.

In other words, what we see as "closeness" can actually be "stuck togetherness."

If most congregations are stuck to some degree, and the stuckness involves emotional processes and barriers, it would make sense to develop a cadre of clergy who can work well with these congregations. We need a network of intentional change agents who are mature, disciplined and capable of working through the inevitable resistance and conflict that arise with change. The clergy need to learn how to respect homeostatic forces, how to work with the most motivated people, how to provoke thinking, ask questions, name the demons, develop vision, teach the teachable and become a presence of hope. The times require an intentional kind of minister who not only performs priestly functions but is at ease with kingly duties and prophetic tasks. We know well how to minister to individuals, but we need to learn how to minister to an entire congregation--the system and the emotional forces that tie everyone together.

Emotional forces operate automatically in congregations, constraining congregational behavior, particularly when anxiety or threat is present. Variations in systems are directly related to the level of anxiety in the system and the degree to which individuals function with self-definition and self-regulation.

The greater the level of anxiety, the more inhibited the congregation will be in adapting to changing conditions and the more the members will function as a stuck together unit. The flexibility of the congregation to respond and adapt to change is severely limited under stress because the automatic forces prevail. When this happens, emotional processes prevent the full potential of the congregation from

being realized. To move beyond the purely automatic, the purely emotional, clergy, along with educated lay leaders, are the key players. The pastor's ability to manage anxiety (rather than to discharge it on others) and to keep a clearheaded sense of direction helps the congregation to calm down and steer its way through sticky times. If the leader functions as anxiously as those being led, the congregation is in trouble. Ironically, to minister to the whole, one needs to focus on one's own functioning first. The most effective change agent will be the one who can manage himself or herself in changing environments.