

RULES KEEPING THE CONGREGATION UNHEALTHY

It is healthy for a congregation to immediately respond to a crisis event or an abusive experience by engaging a defensive posture. However, it is not healthy, once the threat is past, to adopt a survival mode, rather than doing the work of discovery to identify, honor and engage its gifts for mission and service. By remaining in a state of perpetual maintenance the congregation develops some common characteristics revealing a dysfunctional pattern of being. They include:

- General attitude of powerlessness over the congregation's situation.
- Lack of confidence in making decisions (e.g., "We can't decide that. We have to wait until we get a new pastor." "Marge always took care of that, but she died last year. Oh, do we miss her.")
- Critical and judgmental of those who don't act according to expectations.
- Difficulty initiating and following through on a project (e.g., "Three times over the last 20 years we have had architects give us plans, but it never goes anyplace.")
- Rigid and stuck attitudes and behaviors, inability to identify or consider alternatives.
- Inability to deal with change, overreacting and fearful responses such as anger, or withdrawal.
- Often projecting onto others (e.g., "Why don't they get their act together? This is the fourth pastor that the Bishop sent us who didn't work out!")
- Resentment of authority figures (e.g., "A good way to lose friends is to chair the governing board." "I liked our last pastor, he didn't act like one.")
- Dependency upon others (e.g., Audrey always takes care of it.")
- Difficulty celebrating life together and having fun.

These characteristics develop and become part of the congregation's identity as it continues in a reactionary mode. ***This unhealthy system of characteristics is maintained and protected through employing a set of rules.*** The groundbreaking work of Robert Subby and John Friel, *Co-Dependency - A Paradoxical Dependency*,²⁹ identified the characteristics of being unhealthy and the eight rules that keep families unhealthy.

It is not okay to talk about problems.

Feelings should not be expressed openly.

Communication is best when it is indirect (triangulated).

Unrealistic expectations - be strong, good right, perfect, make us proud.

Don't Be Selfish!

Do as I say, not as I do.

It is not okay to have fun and be playful

Don't rock the boat.

The power of these rules keeps the social group focused on maintaining what is unhealthy, rather than risking and striving to claim a healthier state of functioning. The rules are at play in many congregations keeping them in the survival mode fostering dysfunctional characteristics. These are rules that will keep the congregation unhealthy.

In addition to classic dysfunctional behaviors or abuse, deep insecurity, fostered in an atmosphere of low self-esteem and lack of definable identity, also provides the impetus for instating and perpetuating these unhealthy rules. ***The basic function of the rules is to assuage the anxiety generated by the insecurity. These rules give only an illusionary protection from the debilitating insecurity in the system, family or corporate entity.***

The essence and power of these rules will control not only families but also diverse social groups. The rules are ingrained in some cultures. ***Adherence to these eight rules is the foundation of keeping congregations unhealthy.*** As these rules govern congregational life, giving them a sense of order, they will have a severe consequence. These unhealthy rules will hold the congregation in a survival mode. The ramification of following these rules is a very flat affect within the congregation with a muted, but still present, undercurrent of anxiety. There's a sense of walking on eggshells, or waiting for the other shoe to drop. Being in the congregation feels like an intensive-care room in a hospital where the heart monitor is flat lining and a family member gasps and all hold their breath. ***Breaking the rules allows the congregation to walk confidently and to breathe again.***