

- emotional distancing taken to the extreme leads to cut off and breakdown.

The emotional patterns in a society and churches have the same characteristics as family systems.

Just as a family is built up of interlocking relationship triangles, so in society as a whole there is a more complex version of the same system – and emotional patterns of relating from families will be replicated in society at large.

Acute anxiety is temporary stress in the emotional system; **chronic anxiety** is anxiety which is ingrained in the functioning of a system – this sort of anxiety may have built up over time as a result of repeated incidents.

Chronic anxiety in society mirrors chronic anxiety in a family, and may result in regression: where the herd-mentality of togetherness over-rides the need for individuality (the desire for separateness).

Symptoms might appear such as violence, polarisation and rigid beliefs, fear or risk, a ‘blame’ or ‘scape-goating’ culture, litigiousness, all of which can be magnified by the media ‘reflecting back’ anxiety like a mirror into the system. These issues are not causing the anxiety; they are the symptom of the anxiety.

Churches are complex family systems, and these symptoms of anxiety may appear in churches too: as a symptom of anxiety in church relationships; or as a result if anxiety at large in society, from which people might ‘seek refuge’ in churches.

IM as leaders of anxious systems

Interim Ministers are often called to work with church systems suffering from acute anxiety (a short-term stress in the system, such as the loss or indisposition of a leader) or chronic anxiety which might have built up over time.

A significant skill of an IM is to be ‘**a non anxious presence**’ – that is a well differentiated person who is able to work with the system to help it understand its patterns of relating and responding to tensions and stresses; the historic patterns of relating; and to help it see where the issues are and start to define itself differently.

Leaders in an anxious system will experience some predicable responses:

Resistance – because systems tend towards a steady state, the system will try to re-establish equilibrium, therefore attempts to define in a new way may represent a threat to the equilibrium, and the leader may experience groups/individuals banding together to resist a change in the system.

Blame and scape-goating – anxieties in the system might cause the targeting of individuals as the one responsible for the group’s problems. They might be the most vulnerable or the most responsible – even the IM. But this is the system trying to find an outlet or relief for the anxiety by focusing it in a specific place. Some parishes may be labelled ‘clergy killers’ as they may have scape goated a number of previous clergy. In fact, they are just projecting their anxiety onto that leader. The IM needs to help the system understand its anxiety and resolve it in a healthy way.

Invisible patterns (‘*The Naked Emperor*?’)– system’s patterns of relating are largely invisible to those people within it. Repeated patterns of relating or events go unnoticed; little is learned from past mistakes; the system seeks over-simplified explanations and quick fixes.

The BB manual notes: ‘It may take careful research to see how events are interrelated and are driven by an emotional field, affected by a complex web of relationships. Working at this sort of understanding is one of

the most important contributions that a leader can make.’ (p17, leading in Anxious Times Manual, Bridge Builders Ministries 2018)

The work in IM to explore history, identity and seek a new vision, identifying resources and potential partnerships for future development, are therefore critical to help those within the system to notice their patterns and to start defining their system in a new (and hopefully healthier) way.

IM leaders (and all leaders in anxious systems) therefore have to :

Foster a non-anxious presence: creating relationship and fostering an environment in which issues can be expressed and explored in a healthy way, without retreat or attack. As leaders we must offer a living example of that way of being non-anxious (as Jesus was) – but also we must lovingly accept that whatever patterns people bring with them into the system will be learned from their family of origin and may take time to un-learn or change.

Support self-definition: help people to define themselves in a clear and positive way – as individuals and as a system. This means being able to express what you feel or believe, what you need and can offer, what you hope and feel disappointed about. IMs lead the way in this process of definition – not by telling people or the system how they should be, but by responding to the process and behaviours of the system, and often by holding up scripture and biblical examples as models of behaviour and kingdom living, and helping others to define themselves/church well.

Maintain connection: when people feel anxious they will move away from the source of the anxiety – by becoming rude, aggressive or by physically distancing. The IM must retain emotional contact with people who are seen to be blocking the process, disagreeing or rejecting; and the IM also needs to help individuals to maintain (or rebuild) emotional contact with one another.

Stand firm: Resistance and pressure to return to the old ways are inevitable. The IM is there to hold firm to the objectives (agreed at the outset) and the process of change, and their own honestly held convictions, while being flexible enough and willing to adapt the process in the light of others’ genuine concerns.

Well differentiated leadership has the following characteristics:

- Clear self-definitions, purpose, convictions, identity (hence the importance of clear objectives)
- Non-anxiety: The capacity to stay calm in the face of difference and anxiety, and to avoid getting reactive.
- Maintain healthy relationships: The ability to model intimacy and good boundaries
- Maintain connections: The ability to stay connected with those you disagree with and dislike
- Teamworking: drawing on the wisdom of others and sharing the load with peers (transition teams!)
- Resilience: the ability to stay on course in the face of opposition and disappointment
- Humility: the ability to be able to recognise and admit your own limitations and mistakes.
- Courage: the willingness to rock the boat at the right time and disrupt the status quo, especially when faced with injustice or wrong-doing.

Poor differentiation may be marked by an over-functioning, authoritarian approach – not listening, inflexibility, lack of consultation and collaboration; or by contrast, by under-functioning and accommodating, trying to please everyone leaving a leadership vacuum.

Jesus said: ‘Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.’ (John 14.27). However (?source TBC) *‘the processes in a family always have the power to subvert or override its religious values. The emotional system can always jam the spiritual message it is receiving.’*

This material has been developed in response to and with the considerable aid of the training manual from Leading in Anxious Times, by Bridge Builders Ministries, 2018.