

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration
Rev. Dr. Kathryn Ellis
Words of Inspiration, September 29, 2013

When Communities Go Bad

For the past two years, I have served as “Good Offices Person” or Good office to the local chapter of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. Our chapter includes congregations from Southern Delaware and New Jersey to State College, Pennsylvania.

In the role of good officer, I am minister to the ministers, a psychologist and a friend for my colleagues. Sometimes, I am also a consultant for lay leaders in this role, but my primary focus is care for the ministers. As good officer, I have heard and witnessed some sad stories and some dreadful behavior.

Communities are important for us, for our spiritual growth and health, but we shouldn't forget that communities can be rogue. Communities can do great damage to their members, their leaders or to people they label as outsiders as other. Some recent stories:

A psychotic, paranoid person decided that my mature, sensible and caring colleague personified evil and demanded that the minister be punished. The layperson wrote to many people in the congregation, to the district and to the ministry office at the Unitarian Universalist Association. The layperson's understanding of the situation is distorted, not real, and his demands are insatiable. He has threatened the congregation and may have guns in his home. With the police, the board decided to ban the mentally ill person from the congregation. The board wanted to protect the confidentiality of all the people involved, so they did not tell the congregation about this difficult situation and the reasons for it.

But the mentally ill person wrote to more congregation members. Some people in the congregation don't understand that what the layperson wrote is not true, not real. These folks wonder why the layperson isn't being treated more kindly. They ask, “Don't we welcome all people? Why are our leaders and our minister treating him this way?”

In another congregation, the minister was highly anxious and frightened of losing power in the congregation. The minister and the board president were completely unable to hear or understand each other. The congregation began to divide into factions; there were angry outbursts. Both the minister and the board president left the congregation feeling hurt and exhausted.

In still another congregation, a staff member had a personality disorder, a

mental illness that others often don't see at least at first. He projected all his fears and insecurities onto the minister, accusing of her hurtful things that in fact had not really happened. Unfortunately for the minister, the staff person had been with the congregation longer than she had. The staff person convinced many people that the minister was not what she seemed. Much of the congregation's energy became focused on this conflict.

Other stories include secret meetings, hiding in closets to overhear a closed meeting, stealing stationery, general inhumane treatment of ministers, staff or members. Sometimes there are letters to the editor in the local newspaper or protests with signs outside of the church. These days you can find flaming comments on some UU blogs. Sometimes, when there is a difficult, angry or mentally ill person, it is the minister. Sometimes the system has created the angry, acting out behavior.

Now, none of this is new nor is it limited to Unitarian Universalist congregations. In the Christian bible, the only books where the author and time of writing is clearly known are some of the letters of Paul. Paul established religious communities in the ancient Middle East. After he moved on to the next town, he wrote letters back to the congregations he had started. He encouraged them and admonished them. His letters address particular problems in particular communities.

In First Corinthians, he wrote:

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollo," or "I belong to Cephas,." (NRSV 1:10-12)

Paul wrote to the Galatians:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? (NRSV 3:1)

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love (serve one another). For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If however, you bit and devour one another take care that you are not consumed by one another. (NRSV 5:13-15)

We might quibble with Paul's admonition to be of the "same mind," but clearly he is addressing the rise of cliques and conflicts in his communities. It sounds like intense, unhealthy conflict when he warns against consuming one another!

What are the commonalities when communities go bad?

First, there is high anxiety or fear. Peter Steinke, who writes and teaches about healthy congregations, calls it infectious or viral anxiety.ⁱ Kathleen Norris describes this kind of fear in a bible study:

This is a story of fear, a fear so pervasive that even in a small group of people you've known most of your life you can't speak up, you can't risk talking about issues. The meeting had begun and ended with prayer, but no one had a say, no one was heard, and community was diminished.ⁱⁱ

Symptoms or expressions of the virus of anxiety include secrecy and secret meetings, accusations, lies, high reactivity, threats and triangulation. Triangulation is part of human relationships; it means when you talk to a third person about a problem that you are having with someone else. It becomes a problem when you avoid talking directly with the person with whom you have the problem.

In unhealthy conflict, thinking becomes rigid and polarized. "We are right and you are wrong. Period." Emotions are high; complaints are vague and requested solutions are unclear.

Sometimes the fear comes from a changing community; some people want their community to go back to the way it was. Or they want it not to change in the way that it must to welcome others as our worship associate shared this morning. Money can be used as a focus for conflicts about power and control. Threats may be made about not keeping one's pledge. The need for power and control and the need to be right come from fear and insecurity. Always, the need for power and control comes from some fear or insecurity.

Psychologist and pastor, Kenneth Haugk wrote *Antagonists in the Church: How to Identify and Deal with Destructive Conflict*.

Antagonists are individuals who on the basis of *nonsubstantive evidence*, go out of their way to make *insatiable demands*, usually attacking the person or performance of others. These attacks are *selfish in nature*, *tearing down rather than building up*, and are frequently directed against those in a leadership capacity.ⁱⁱⁱ

He described "hard core antagonists" and "major antagonists" as people who go out of their way to create destructive conflict; they want to destroy those they see as their enemy. These people are generally seriously mentally ill. Hard

core antagonists are often psychotic and paranoid. They cannot be reasoned with.

Major antagonists are those with personality disorders; they are not out of touch with reality in the same way. But their problems are deep seated. They may be capable of reasoning but in high level conflict, they refuse to reason.

When a community is dealing with antagonists of this sort, it is important to be able to recognize it. These are not folks who can be cared for in the community or be reconciled to it without significant mental health treatment. Healthy communities set clear boundaries.

The ability to recognize antagonists comes with emotional maturity. One needs the ability to understand one's own feelings and thoughts, to be what the psychologists call "differentiated." This means knowing the difference between your own feelings and someone else's feelings. It means the abilities to take a stand and to stay connected. At the same time. A self differentiated person is one with humility. You can listen to another person and know that differing stories can both be true. You can listen to another person and allow yourself to discern. If a story makes you feel a little crazy, that's an important sign that something isn't quite right.

Mentally ill people impact congregations when:

People believe the distorted reality and don't pay attention to their own internal sense that something is wrong.

People are afraid of the antagonist and do not set clear boundaries, do not confront bad behavior.

Communities can create "immunities" to the virus of anxiety. This community's covenant is an invitation to congregational immunity.

When we act with integrity, listen deeply to one another, embrace our differences and celebrate our diversity, we create a healthy community.

When we speak for ourselves and don't make assumptions about others, we create healthy community.

When we assume other's good intentions, we create healthy community.

When we acknowledge differences and problems without demonizing or discounting, we can solve problems and live together in love. I invite you to post our covenant where you can read it from time to time.

Theologian Richard Niebuhr declared that the purpose of the ministry and the congregation is “the increase of the love of God and the neighbor.” By love, Niebuhr meant an attitude of gratitude and respect: “Love is reverence; it keeps its distance even as it draws near; it does not seek to absorb the other in the self or want to be absorbed by it.”^{iv}

Let us continue to create healthy community as we let love guide us!

Amen. Ashe. Blessed Be.

ⁱ Steinke, Peter. *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1996.

ⁱⁱ Norris, Kathleen. *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1993, p. 114.

ⁱⁱⁱ Haugk, Kenneth C. *Antagonists in the Church: How to Identify and Deal with Destructive Conflict*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988, pp. 25-26.

^{iv} Quoted in Peter Steinke. *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1996, p.75.