

## **An Overview of the Lombard Retreat Weekend**

Randy Jedele

During the second weekend of February of 2010, several Urbandale UCC members, along with members from other UCC churches gathered in our Fellowship Hall for a retreat with the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center. The purpose of the retreat was to aid us as we moved through our interim period and prepared ourselves for a new called pastor. The focus of the retreat was to learn how to “facilitate healthy pastor-congregation relations.” The intent of this document is part of the educational series being used this year to familiarize the congregation with family systems theory; this document is to serve as an overview or introduction to systems thinking for those who could not, for various reasons, attend the retreat. The weekend was divided into the following components:

- The Crisis in the Pastorate System
- The Congregation as a Family System
- Managing Healthy Pastoral Relations
- Strengthening Support Systems for Pastors
- Systems for Managing Conflict Constructively
- Promoting Healthy Church Systems

### **The Crisis in the Pastorate System**

In order to better understand the need for healthy pastor-congregation relations, we were first introduced to the symptoms and causes of the crisis in the pastorate system. There are many symptoms for this crisis, such as “low clergy morale and self-esteem, pastors under attack, pastors self-destructing, high rates of involuntary terminations, pastors abandon[ing] the call, and a shortage of pastors.” In addition, there are many causes for the crisis, such as “pastoral transitions are poorly managed, weak support systems for pastors, conflict becomes unmanageable, churches act like dysfunctional families, and we live in an era which is leadership toxic.” During this Friday evening introduction, it didn’t take us long to realize that we were, for multiple reasons, in the midst of our own crisis and in need of healing.

### **The Congregation as a Family System**

As we became acquainted with family systems theory and the understanding that a congregation is a family system, it became even more obvious that we were imbalanced and in need of healing. We recognized that we were guilty of some of the same characteristics of dysfunctional families, such as overfunctioning; creating triangles; allowing anxiety to control and dominate our decisions; and passing blame on to others, rather than accepting responsibilities ourselves. In addition, we learned of the importance and need for self differentiation and that “by God’s grace, dysfunctional patterns of behavior can be overcome; . . . such healing starts with being grounded in one’s relationship with God in Christ.

Part of the healing from this dysfunctional state can occur when we minister appropriately to one another and place focus in the following areas:

- the whole, not the parts
- process, not people
- systemic factors (structures and patterns), not symptoms
- strength, not weakness
- responsibility, not triangling
- challenge, not comfort
- self, not others
- direction, not conditions

Healing also occurs when we incorporate certain strategies for ministering to a congregational system. For example, when we strengthen congregational structures and processes, such as establishing a support system for the pastor; handling conflict in a constructive manner by institutionalizing the Matthew 18 process of open and direct communication, rather than by building triangles; and developing leadership through self-differentiation, we will experience more wholeness as a congregation.

### **Managing Healthy Pastoral Transitions**

Basically, there are three stages in the process of pastoral transitions: (1) saying good-bye or bringing closure to the relationship with the departing pastor, (2) searching for a new pastor, and (3) assisting the new pastor's entry into the congregation.

Saying good-bye in an appropriate manner is important because whenever the status quo is interrupted, the level of anxiety rises. Whenever the level of anxiety goes up, the potential for conflict and lack of understanding and ability to get along also rises. In order to ease the pain of the closure experience, it is important to follow various steps, such as making sure the congregation understands why the pastor is leaving, "letting go of old grudges, sharing expressions of sadness and uncertainty, . . . [and] ritualizing the process of closure through corporate worship as a way of acknowledging God's leading," to name a few. In addition, both the interim period and the period of transition for the new pastor are also steps in the closure process.

There can be potential impediments to this closure process, such as members of the congregation being stuck some place in the grief process because some form of the death has been experienced by the loss of the old pastor, making comparisons between the old and the new pastor, complaining about the new pastor with the old pastor, or when members of the congregation ask the old pastor to continue to function in a pastoral manner. For true healing to happen, closure must be complete.

The search for a new pastor is the second step in the healthy pastoral transition period. The Lombard workbook suggests that this process is a two-way road in that churches need to be searching for healthy leaders and pastors need to be searching for healthy congregations. Although the workbook doesn't offer a timeframe for this process, I think we have realized that

it must be a prayerful and extensive search. Rushing through the process because the congregation is unhappy with the interim, is not the proper search procedure.

And finally, the pastoral transition is about how the new pastor enters the system. Just as the search process to bring the new pastor aboard should not be rushed, the entry should also be a slow process, taking at a minimum of a year to experience this entry. One of the purposes of this first year is to allow the pastor to “focus on building relationships [by] meeting with as many members as possible in small groups.” This is a time to listen to multiple stories and perspectives about the church’s history from many voices. During this year, it is important for the new pastor to “learn the formal, informal, and tacit roles, rules, and rituals, [as well as] learn about the congregation’s history and sacred traditions.” Also during the first year, it is important that the new pastor not recommend making any “significant changes.”

### **Strengthening Support Systems for Pastors**

Because “congregations often have an unrealistically broad range of expectations of pastors,” it is important that the pastor and congregation negotiate expectations. At the beginning of the pastor’s tenure, these expectations need to be clearly stated and reviewed annually. It is important that these expectations be grounded in the “congregation’s mission and priorities.” (Since Pastor Dave’s arrival the Leadership Team has completed a formal job description, which will later be a part of how he is evaluated on an annual basis.)

An important support piece to have in place for the pastor is what is commonly referred to as the Pastor-Congregation Relations Committee. One of the work groups that was formed as a result of the Lombard weekend was a team to determine what this support group should look like for Urbandale UCC. The process for selecting this group of five members with a two-year rotation of membership, which is now called Pastor-Congregation Covenant Team, and an explanation of the team’s purpose has been established. The team met for the first time with Pastor Dave in late October. While this team has a variety of functions, the team primarily provides “personal support to the pastor and the pastor’s family.”

Also, an important piece in providing support for the pastor is making a “commitment to regular evaluation” at a variety of levels:

- ongoing informal evaluation
- special reviews if necessary
- annual evaluation
- comprehensive evaluation every three years

One of the key suggestions that many of us who attended the weekend focused on when thinking about the evaluation process is the Lombard suggestion that “all are held accountable” when designing the evaluation process. With that idea in mind, there is a committee led by Bonita Wiley that is in the process of designing Urbandale’s evaluation process. In this process, the pastor will be evaluated according to the congregation’s expectations as outlined in the new job description, members of the congregation will be expected to evaluate the congregation as to

how effective it is in fulfilling its mission and ministry expectations, and each member will have the opportunity to ask, “How well am I doing in the growth and ministry of this church?”

The best technique to use while designing the evaluation process is to “focus on strengths, not weaknesses.” Such a focus can be accomplished by centering on the following concepts:

- Emphasize blessings and accomplishments to be celebrated.
- Make evaluation an affirmative process.
- Use evaluation as a tool to build up the Body of Christ.
- Focus on potential growth, not weakness.
- Affirm what’s working well because this provides valuable emotional support for addressing those areas needing attention.

### **Systems for Managing Conflict Constructively**

The arena of conflict is not only huge, but also difficult to narrow down into a brief summary or analysis of what was covered during the Lombard weekend. It is safe to say that it will take an intense investment in time and energy for any church to understand how to manage conflict. With that said, first and foremost it is important “to affirm the positive role of conflict and help people see conflict as an opportunity for growth.” We have decided that Urbandale UCC’s first steps in understanding conflict is to become aware of how destructive triangulating can be and to embrace “the Matthew 18 process for resolving conflict according to biblical principles.”

Designing a collaborative model for congregational decision-making is crucial in avoiding, as well as overcoming conflict. The Lombard workbook outlines stages for moving into and working through this decision-making process. The first stage is setting a foundation, which is followed by a reflective stage. Both of these stages precede the final, or decision-making stage, which involves gathering information, developing a consensus proposal, and making a final decision.

Additional topics focused on conflict were also addressed during the weekend. For example, there is a process and purpose if congregational mediation is necessary. Types of conflict and levels of conflict were also presented. Some of the topics referenced here have already been introduced at various levels of the congregation. We have already had discussions about triangulating and embracing Matthew 18 as a model for resolving conflict. Also, a recent Adult Spiritual Formation discussion was focused on conflict and ways to recognize it, handle it in a positive way, and grow from it.

### **Promoting Healthy Church Systems**

The focus of this part of the weekend was on how societal regression is impacting churches in today’s world. One technique that can be adopted on a personal level, as well as a congregational level, is to always work on an “internal coherent set of beliefs and principles that can be used as a basis for thoughts and actions.” One method for developing these beliefs and principles is to become involved in personal transformation because meditation, prayer, and spiritual

experiences can translate into improving self differentiation. The workbook provided the following attributes for higher levels of differentiation:

- individuality is greater developed, togetherness needs are less intense
- ability to remain a self, while staying in emotional contact with the group
- ability to enhance one's own welfare, without impinging on the welfare of others
- takes responsibility for self
- focuses on one's own functioning

The bottom line is the fact that the church will become more healthy and develop better healthy pastor-congregational relationships as more and more people within the system understand their level of differentiation and learn how to live and love others who co-exist in the same congregational system. We must remember that because we are human beings, we will forever be exposed to conflict. It's how we handle those conflicts we encounter that will determine our healthiness.

If this overview has peaked your interest in family systems theory, you can read more by checking out one of the Lombard workbooks from the church office. In addition, there are two copies of *The Leader's Journey*, the book the Leadership Team is reading and studying this program year, available to be checked out from the church office. Speaking of journey, we are, indeed, on one and these are exciting times for our church family to grow as we allow Pastor Dave to gracefully come to the table with us. Let us forever keep our hearts and minds on God's mission and purpose first. It is my belief that when we set Christ as our standard, we can move forward and overcome whatever barriers we may encounter.