



Healthy congregations respond to anxiety

By Bishop Larry Wohlrabe

Thank God for the gift of anxiety! If we had no anxiety about anything, we'd never climb out of bed in the morning, never get to work on time, never finish an assignment or meet a deadline. A modest degree of anxiety or stress gets us going in life.

But what about *unrelenting* anxiety? What if we continually operate on the high side of anxiety—above the threshold of normal, run-of-the-mill stress? What if anxiety paralyzes us, stops us in our tracks, overwhelms us? What then?

The word anxiety comes from a Latin word *angere*, meaning “to cause pain by squeezing.” Related words are anger, angst, angina (heart pain). The image here is telling: anxiety run amok constricts us, squeezes us, reduces our options and possibilities. It feels as if the “cords of death” are wrapped around our necks, choking off our oxygen supply (Psalm 18:4).

This is true for organizations as well as individuals. Congregations are living bodies—vibrant emotional systems of inter-relationships. Congregations can easily become “anxious systems.” And when that happens they become constricted, limited, “squeezed.”

Peter Steinke contends that there are ten common triggers of anxiety in congregations:

- Money (too little or too much, e.g. a large bequest)
- Changing worship patterns
- Issues around sexuality
- Pastor's leadership style
- “Old versus new” discussions
- Concern over growth or survival
- Conflicts among church staff or resignation of a staff member
- Being overly focused on internal matters or on external matters
- Suffering some major trauma, tension or transition
- Harm done to a child or the death of a child.

Every congregation deals with anxiety. That's a given. The crucial question before us is: will we mindlessly, automatically **react** to anxiety? Or will we reflectively, thoughtfully **respond** to anxiety?

This is the fourth in a series of articles on the marks of healthy congregations. Bishop Larry encourages congregation councils or other parish leadership groups to use these articles for their opening devotions.

When a congregation simply *reacts* to anxiety we notice things like...

- Folks are constantly critical of one another;
- Persons or groups make threats, engage in manipulation, throw tantrums;
- Splinter groups form;
- Change is feared and rejected;
- Quick fixes are sought, and the path of least resistance is preferred;
- People keep secrets and avoid open communication;
- Folks get stuck in narrow, “either/or” thinking and thus miss the array of possibilities before them.

When a congregation and its leaders learn to regulate their stress and *respond* to anxiety they:

- Avoid snap judgments and quick fixes;
- Take time to gather information and analyze options;
- Generate all sorts of possible solutions;
- Endure short-term pain for the sake of long-term health;
- Commit themselves to living in the unity of Jesus Christ;
- Make wise, balanced, thoughtful decisions;
- Trust that God will sustain them, guide them and bless their faithful efforts in the midst of anxious times.

(This article is based on the Healthy Congregations training materials by Dr. Peter Steinke.)

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. How do you recognize when you're dealing with high anxiety? What physical symptoms show up? How do you know when anxiety is operating in your congregation? What are its symptoms?
2. Recall a time when your congregation **reacted** rather than **responded** to anxiety. What happened and what was the outcome?
3. Right now what is one way you could help your congregation live into the “broad place” of God's care and mercy? How could your church improve its capacities to **respond** rather than **react** to anxiety?

Connections is a publication of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod, ELCA designed for congregational use. For more information, contact the synod office:
218-299-3019 800-452-3692
www.nwmnsynod.org



Northwestern Minnesota Synod
Connections
Connecting the Congregational, Synodical, and Churchwide
Expressions of the ELCA



Healthy congregations respond to anxiety

By Bishop Larry Wohrbe

Thank God for the gift of anxiety! If we had no anxiety about anything, we'd never climb out of bed in the morning, never get to work on time, never finish an assignment or meet a deadline. A modest degree of anxiety or stress gets us going in life.

But what about *unrelenting* anxiety? What if we continually operate on the high side of anxiety—above the threshold of normal, run-of-the-mill stress? What if anxiety paralyzes us, stops us in our tracks, overwhelms us? What then? The word anxiety comes from a Latin word *angere*, meaning “to cause pain by squeezing.” Related words are anger, angst, angina (heart pain). The image here is telling: anxiety run amok constricts us, squeezes us, reduces our options and possibilities. It feels as if the “cords of death” are wrapped around our necks, choking off our oxygen supply (Psalm 18:4).

This is the fourth in a series of articles on the marks of healthy congregations. Bishop Larry encourages congregation councils or other parish leadership groups to use these articles for their opening devotions.

This is true for organizations as well as individuals. Congregations are living bodies—vibrant emotional systems of inter-relationships. Congregations can easily become “anxious systems.” And when that happens they become constricted, limited, “squeezed.”

Peter Steinke lists ten common triggers of anxiety in congregations:

- Money (too little or too much, e.g. a large bequest)
- Changing worship patterns
- Issues around sexuality
- Pastor’s leadership style
- “Old versus new” discussions
- Concern over growth or survival
- Conflicts among church staff or resignation of a staff member
- Being overly focused on internal matters or on external matters

Continued on back

- Suffering some major trauma, tension or transition
- Harm done to a child or the death of a child.

Every congregation deals with anxiety. That’s a given. The crucial question before us is: will we mindlessly, automatically **react** to anxiety? Or will we reflectively, thoughtfully **respond** to anxiety?

- When a congregation simply *reacts* to anxiety we notice things like...
- Folks are constantly critical of one another;
 - Persons or groups make threats, engage in manipulation, throw tantrums;
 - Splinter groups form;
 - Change is feared and rejected;
 - Quick fixes are sought, and the path of least resistance is preferred;
 - People keep secrets and avoid open communication;
 - Folks get stuck in narrow, “either/or” thinking and thus miss the array of possibilities before them.

When a congregation and its leaders learn to regulate their stress and *respond* to anxiety they:

- Avoid snap judgments and quick fixes;
- Take time to gather information and analyze options;
- Generate all sorts of possible solutions;
- Endure short-term pain for the sake of long-term health;
- Commit themselves to living in the unity of Jesus Christ;
- Make wise, balanced, thoughtful decisions;
- Trust that God will sustain them, guide them and bless their faithful efforts in the midst of anxious times.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. How do you recognize when you’re dealing with high anxiety? What physical symptoms show up? How do you know when anxiety is operating in your congregation? What are its symptoms?
2. Recall a time when your congregation **reacted** rather than **responded** to anxiety. What happened and what was the outcome?
3. Right now what is one way you could help your congregation live into the “broad place” of God’s care and mercy? How could your church improve its capacities to **respond** rather than **react** to anxiety?

The Northwestern Minnesota Synod

901 8th St. S. Moorhead, MN 56562
218-299-3019 800-452-3692 www.nwmnsynod.org