

ATTACHMENT

While it is the primary purpose of this work to introduce you to the process and benefits of identifying the congregation's personality, we must step back and, in these next chapters, begin with acknowledging the identity challenges and health consequences facing many congregations today. The lack of understanding the power and role of the congregation's personality has created a climate wherein the healthy development of the corporate personality of many congregations has been suppressed and stunted. Unhealthy patterns and habits are counter productive to the goals of mission and service in and through the congregation. Their intrusiveness will inhibit congregations from realizing the benefits of identifying and engagement with the strengths and preferences of the corporate personality. For far too many congregations their personality has been ignored and therefore never fully developed. The maturation process has been interrupted. The congregation is undifferentiated.

*Differentiation is the process of development ...
wherein an identity of self is built while remaining connected.*¹

Self-identity and self-reliance are fostered in a relationship of attachment. Attachment is not synonymous with dependency.² Attachment is a necessary aspect of healthy relationships. Two people in love, a teacher and students, a pastor and congregation develop attachments to each other. Attachment with the pastor, especially the founding pastor, is vital in its nurturing role. Healthy attachment is a

supportive aspect of a relationship, which will reduce the anxiety and stress of insecurity creating space for the congregation to achieve greater self-reliance. Attachment is primarily relational, but may also be experienced as a bonding with object or place.³ There can be healthy and unhealthy attachments. If the relational attachments with clergy fail to bring a homeostasis — a stable equilibrium based on interdependence — to the congregation, the membership may turn to material attachments with its land, cemetery, facilities, and/or worship space and objects, including flags. When the congregation lacks healthy differentiation an attachment to objects, can, and often does, turn into a rigid dependency on preserving them.

Dependency, allowing one's self to be subordinate to or controlled by another, or to the preservation of an object, can block the healthy development of future relationships and healthy attachments. Anxiety, anger, depression, and emotional detachment can be the result of disruptions in the attachment process caused by separation or loss or threat of separation,⁴ or betrayal of trust. When the differentiation process has been suspended, attachment broken, and the sense of self, sense of identity, fails to fully develop many congregations will settle into a maintenance mode. A sense of insecurity permeates the congregation. A bond of dependency will likely be formed with subsequent clergy. The primary role of this bonding is for the sake of preservation and protection, not growth.

Pastor Fred, a year into serving his present congregation, said, "When will I learn? This congregation was so convincing when it said it wanted change and growth. And I believed them. Like the others, they didn't really mean it."

I suggest many congregations are aware that they need to change and they do want growth but because of a previous broken attachment they are responding out of dependency. This state of dependency seeks security and too often finds that security in objects and behavioral patterns of its past. Congregations will become dependent on their facilities, on the ancestors buried in the adjacent cemetery, or on the pastor acting in a certain manner. Clergy either enabling the dependency, or addressing it head-on, thwart the congregation's need to move forward in developing and using its gifts and abilities for worship, mission and service. Dependency most frequently persists, and becomes a block to development, when the clergy are as dependent on the congregation for their own identity and sense of self as the congregation is dependent on the pastor. Often clergy respond too hastily to the dependency by trying to move the congregation forward, instituting growth and change, before a trusting mutual relationship is formed. What the congregation needs is healthy attachment, a relationship it can trust. This must be developed first before there will be any openness to growth and change.

Congregation's with attachment issues may need to have a healthy bond reestablished to have a sense of stability and safety thereby reducing anxiety and insecurity.⁵ They often try to replace the pastor of their attachment with a pastor who is most similar. You can hear in their longings, "We haven't had a good pastor since Rev. Altmann retired in 1979." Many judicatory leaders hear this attachment as an unhealthy dependency. They have sound reasons for encouraging the congregation to look in a new direction, but I wonder how often that works for the

congregation. Attachment issues for a congregation, particularly one that has not yet developed its identity, is more powerful than judicatory leaders calculate. Assuaging the attachment issues is essential in order for the congregation to move forward into development of its own identity. Re-engaging the development process can only be accomplished by establishing an attachment that feels like the one that was lost.

Prairie United was founded in 1890. In its recent history Pastor Almosen served the congregation from 1965 to 1993. His term was followed with a succession of three pastors and two interims over the next 14 years, all experiencing various levels of unrest and conflict. At two different times the congregation disintegrated into severe conflict. Each time the judicatory had a different consultant work with the congregation attempting to mitigate the severe conflict. The congregation continued sharp declines. A group of about thirty left and started a new congregation. Then a judicatory leader assigned to work with this congregation, and knowing Pastor Almosen, intuitively and intentionally recommended a pastor to the search committee who, it was judged, displayed similar personality traits, temperament, energy, sense of humor, and ministry focus. They called Pastor Zwillinger.

The congregation has been calm and beginning to engage in ministry as they fully accepted and affirmed Pastor Zwillinger. Prairie United is now in a state of relative calm, stability and growth. They not only weathered the financial crisis of 2008-09, but also gave employees a 3% raise for 2010 and an even larger increase to

the pastor. This while every other congregation in the same community cut all staff salaries up to 10% in 2010.

A genuine challenge is for Prairie United, led by their trust in Pastor Zwillinger, is to mature and through their attachment develop greater self-confidence in their identity; thereby reducing their dependency on the pastor. If the congregation, engaged in a healthy attachment, can discover and own its personality, it will have an opportunity to become more self-differentiated and, celebrating its giftedness, connecting in healthy ways with their pastor for the sake of engaging their mission.

Endnotes

1. Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, (New York, NY, The Guilford Press, 1985), 27.
2. Pat Sable, *Attachment and Adult Psychotherapy*, (Northvale, NJ, Jason Aronson Inc., 2000), 17 - 20.
3. *Ibid.*, 12.
4. *Ibid.*, 3.
5. This conclusion, I believe, finds substantiation in the work of John Bowlby, whose theories broaden the work of Klein, Winnicott, Fairbairn, and Balint on objective relations by using an ethological approach, human behavior from a biological perspective. This leads Bowlby to a deeper understanding of the importance of healthy attachments that is distinguished from dependency. Sable, 10 - 26.