

Healthy Congregations – Answers to Questions from October 13, 2009
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NORTHEAST DISTRICT

Questions:

- 1. How does a gay or lesbian person live out his/her sexuality without denying it and thus risk “misconduct” under current UMC policy?**

Under the current UMC policy, the rules for clergy are “*celibacy in singlehood and faithfulness in marriage.*” Since the UMC does not recognize marriage between two gay or lesbian people at this time, a gay or lesbian clergy person would have to choose celibacy. However, acknowledging and honoring one’s sexuality can and should occur for people regardless of their relational status. For some in the UMC, this matter is a justice issue, and those persons organize and fight for equal standing between straight and gay clergy on matters of marriage. For others in the UMC, this matter is a moral issue, and they organize and fight for the rules to remain as they are. Only history will tell us how this will be resolved in the UMC.

- 2. How can we balance our relationships – personal and public – when we are told 50 to 55 hours a week for church work is best?**

Managing personal and public relationships requires thought and evaluation as to the boundaries set for both – while energy levels in different people fluctuate and so what is manageable for one person may be not be for another, it is important to model to congregants appropriate self care and professional care as an ethic of the life of faith. A good question to ask is: what time allotment is required of me to accomplish my ministry in good faith, what time allotment is required to accomplish my personal relationships in good faith, what time allotment is required to accomplish my responsibility in the life of prayer and spirit? Bishop Rueben Job once said, “an hour a day, a day a month and a week a year.”

- 3. What are the instructions for the last handout?**

HERE IS THE OUTLINE:

Healthy Congregations Workshop – October 13, 2009

- A. Perfect Love and Self Forgetting
 - a. Amnesia: We live in forgetfulness to parts of ourselves
 - b. We are like sleepwalkers or amputees
 - i. we say and do things without wakefulness
 - ii. we feel what is not there or do not feel what is there
 - c. Attention to the body includes attention to the sacred inner body and attention to the sacred body includes attention to the physical body

- d. Scripture references – both Romans, renewal of the mind and Corinthians we are all of the body
- B. What does Living in the Flesh or Living in the Spirit mean?
- a. The nature of Covenant
 - i. Harold Kushner’s description of the 10 Commandments – notion of brokenness and wholeness
 - ii. The covenant of human relationship – I/Thou
 - b. The psychological ramifications of seeing others as whole or divided
 - i. When is other “other” and when is other “myself?”
 - 1. projection
 - 2. projective identification
 - 3. transference/counter transference
 - ii. Biblically – 1 John: to have oneself revealed in ongoing time
- C. The Practices of Living in Covenantal Relationship
- a. To Be Single: “An old Me and a new I” – to be the subject of one’s life
 - i. Ronald Rolheiser: the poverty of singlehood
 - 1. the boundary of the self as connected to all
 - 2. the integrity of singular intimacy with God
 - ii. To attend to others without intimate demand
 - iii. To care for the self without hesitation
 - 1. dating
 - 2. friendships
 - b. To be Partnered: To be a We while remaining Me
 - i. Nearness as a category of Christian Householding
 - ii. To practice caring for another and oneself
 - 1. the struggles remind of boundary and need
 - 2. the joys remind of union and communion
 - 3. the integrity of the triune nature of God/Self/Other
 - 4. When things go wrong: divorce, death, losses, addictions
 - c. The Respecting of Self and Others
 - i. To be a Ministerial Professional is to hold the boundary for others
 - 1. people practice with you as a way of learning how to care for themselves and other people
 - 2. people need you to be appropriate
 - ii. To be a Ministerial Professional is to know where to go to care for yourself
 - iii. To be a Ministerial Professional is to have enough contact with people outside your professional community that you have perspective
 - iv. To be a Ministerial Professional is to learn to trust yourself well enough to know when you are strong and when you are weak and to seek appropriate support, accountability and strength

D. The Practices of Living in Covenant with God: Stewardship of the Soul

- a. Prayer
- b. Worship
- c. Exercise
- d. Nutrition
- e. Mercy
- f. Justice
- g. Love

SOUTHWEST DISTRICT

1. "Open hearts, open minds, open doors:" how do we live in an "open-hearted" fashion within the faith community

And he answered them, "you shall love the lord your god with all your mind, with all your heart and with all your strength, and the second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

(Perhaps the further answer to this question is how we understand "neighbor." Jesus went on to delineate that through the story of the Good Samaritan. Are you the Samaritan? An Innkeeper? The pack animal who carries the wounded? If so, then your neighbor is anyone else. I think we learn about how to love our neighbor as we learn how to love ourselves and also from the closest relationships that emanate from us. A good question to ask is, "how would I like to be treated, respected, interacted with?")

2. Expand the meaning of "forgetfulness"

The concept of forgetfulness follows a body reality: sometimes under stress or under duress, the brain shuts off awareness of parts of the body – thus the case of amnesia for instance, or nerve damage that prevents the body from feeling certain sensations. The brain also creates phantom feeling – for instance an amputee may have sensations for a limb that no longer is attached to his or her body.

Since our minds and spirits are intricately and inseparably attached to our bodies, the principle can hold that at times we shut away feelings or thoughts that we do not know what to do with, how to handle, or which may require something of us (for instance, under extreme stress people become confused and forgetful of even basic functions at times or, in a different direction, sometimes people shut out conscience, which is a good thing and moral gage, because they feel uncomfortable with a sense of guilt – but sometimes what we call guilty feelings are ways of the mind speaking to us as a barometer of our behavior).

When we "forget" how loved we are, we tend to allow ourselves to behave in unloving ways toward ourselves and others. Thus the notion of remembering includes first of all this remembering of being loved. One way to do this is to remember how you love another. Then reflect on how another loves oneself and how god loves.

When we remember we are loved, and what that feels like, it is more likely that we will behave in ways commensurate with love.

3. How do I get my pieces back together in covenant?

First is the awareness of the different parts of self and what they are trying to achieve: do you have a fearful part of self that is trying to defend your inner being? Do you have an angry part of self that is attached to persons or places long ago or even in the present time? Do you have a gracious part of self that seeks to manage your mind and behavior?

Second: allow the different parts of your self experience to be noticed and cared about. So if you feel hurt or angry for instance, allow yourself to simply have those feelings without the need to act upon them. That is the second part: noticing without acting upon feelings

Thirdly, practice prayer, exercise, social engagement, mindfulness meditation and other activities that allow many facets of your personality to breathe and flourish. We are complex and require many kinds of experiences to be whole.

4. How do you really separate mind and spirit?

In reality there is no way to separate mind and spirit as they are unified in this life. We simply use that language to identify different awarenesses of experience.

5. How can you be certain of “safe” when seeking that perfect love?

In life there are no guarantees but it might be good to remember that “safe” is not synonymous with painless or at times unpleasant. All relationships have good and bad moments. But a relationship that follows the agreements inherent in it – for instance the agreement to be a friend is different than the agreement to be a spouse which is different from the agreement to be someone’s pastor – then the “safeness” of the relationship should emerge over time.

SOUTHEAST DISTRICT

1. Please say something about the importance of local church pastors limiting the number of formal pastoral counseling sessions and also something about referral as a part of maintaining healthy congregational relationships.

Generally, the rule of thumb is three counseling sessions and then referral. This is for two primary reasons: the expertise and competency to go in depth with another, couple or family, and then the time constraints of a pastor who is responsible for many people on many levels. There are also factors of how other people in the congregation may feel about pastors offering extended and what might be felt as “special” time with a few people over the broader duties to the many. That can create larger relational problems for a pastor. That decision must also be measured against the feeling of the community or the people involved that the pastor is withholding. Referral is a good tool of care as it reminds people that they belong to a wider community and the pastor can use referral as a method of caring for others.

2. Why “I/Thou” instead of “I/you”

The use of the word, “thou” comes from Martin Buber’s work on seeing the sacred in another. “thou” confers upon another dignity and respect that signals an awareness of the other as a vessel of the Holy Spirit and a unique child of God. Try using it in your mind toward yourself and others as a way of regulating your experience toward yourself and others...

3. What are some suggestions to reduce evening stimulus, i.e., meetings, to facilitate healthy sleep?

Not running meetings after 9 p.m. is a great place to start. A cup of tea, a glass of warm milk, sitting quietly with soft music, taking a late night walk can all facilitate restful sleep.

4. Why the strong objection to dating within the parish? I know too many clergy whose spouse was originally a parishioner who have very strong marriages. What are we saying to and about them?

The prohibition about dating within the parish is a suggestion based in the understanding of the pastor as a professional working with a group of people, and as such, the role of suitor or potential spouse, can confuse those professional boundaries. However the suggestion is not disciplinary, but advisory. There are lots of ways problems can result that do not occur if a pastor dates outside the parish. For instance, if a pastor dates a parishioner and then breaks up with that person, what is the emotional content for the pastor, the parishioner and the congregation? Would the pastor then date other members of the congregation? We are sent to serve not to date the people! What if in a failed relationship, the parishioner decides to file a sexual harassment charge against the pastor? These are certain problems that can exist in such a setting.

However there are strong marriages that emerge from the life of ministry, and sometimes these have occurred between pastor and parishioner. That is why this is advisory and not disciplinary.

5. Please say more about “we modern people try to avoid feeling in our emotional bodies.” It seems that on some level modern people are greedy for feeling in the body.

This is a bit of a paradox: dysregulation in the body/mind/spirit can cause excessive emotions and feelings within a person. Because the brain is a habituating system, people can become “addicted” to excessive emotion. A healthy body/mind/spirit works like a measure to allow us to feel and experience without being overloaded. Eugene Genlin, a psychologist, once remarked that if you wanted to know how the soup tastes, you did not stick your head in the pot. You just take a sip. That is something like what we are looking for in this way: if we learn how to “sip” our emotions we neither become avoidant to them nor overindulge and we practice understanding ourselves and our needs more accurately.

6. Mrs. Trimble mentioned “The Invitation”. Where would I find this?

The book is The Invitation by Mariah Mountain Dreamer. It is available from Amazon and Barnes & Noble booksellers.

7. How can the Conference nurture friendships amongst the clergy?

As the conference is comprised of clergy and lay members, friendships must emanate from the actions and outreach of its membership. Gatherings in covenant groups, rim groups and attending district and conference gatherings hope to foster friendship as well as professional growth

8. Is there a better term than “poverty of singleness?”

The term poverty in singleness emerges from the work of Ronald Rolheiser and is used to suggest a way of connecting with people rather than an impoverishment. The notion is that of “poor in spirit” which does not mean impoverished, but rather open to receive. I agree that in the modern parlance the term poverty in singleness can be misunderstood and better terms are probably available!

9. Why use the term “intimate demand?”

The term “intimate demand” connotes the way a mutual relationship carries within it a requirement, hopefully of attending, listening, allowing, and interchange that meets agreed upon needs. Sometimes relationships fall out of balance because one or the other does not want to be committed to the requirement of the relationship.

10. We are told not to become too friendly with church members, but doesn't that limit trust and our mandate to direct those wishing counseling?

Rather the question is not friendliness, the question is enmeshment. Clergy must have a friendly feeling with their parishioners, but also a little distance or space in order to measure need and response with as much rational and objective point of view as possible.

11. Who protects the clergy from abuse?

Hopefully the District Superintendent, the SPRC Committee, and the pastor him or herself protects the clergy from abuse.

SOUTH CENTRAL DISTRICT

1. What are simple definitions of projection and projective identification?

Projection is putting onto another person feelings, thoughts and beliefs that are actually your own.

Projective identification is agreeing to hold, believe or feel that the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of another are in fact your own

2. What is the point of discussing projection or projective identification?

People unconsciously engage in projection and projective identification, and sometimes this causes people to misunderstand each other, to feel disappointed in each other, or to move into relationships that are unhealthy. Asking oneself whether the other person really does feel or believe what you think they do is helpful in truly understanding the unique dignity of another person. Asking yourself whether you actually feel, believe or think something in relationship to another person gives yourself greater dignity and honesty as a person and may prevent you from engaging in a relationship style with a church member that is based more on fantasy or need rather than on the gospel of love. It also protects you from agreeing to beliefs or feelings that you truly do not have, but allows you to identify how another person feels – this is a form of knowledge and can be very beneficial in the ministry.

3. Why ask me to read something and then read it to me?

Thank you for having read it. First, the idea was that it might be easier for people to have a copy of the text for discussion purposes. Secondly, we learned something about that as i was not sure it would be read before i delivered that paper. Thirdly, sometimes there is a difference between the read and spoken way of hearing – perhaps it worked for some and not for others. Finally, i think next time the text will be handed out after given to see how that works. Thank you though for actually reading it.