

# Emotional Triangles

By Michael M. Remson, D.D.

Family systems theory, developed by the late Murray Bowen, M.D., was first applied to congregational life by Bowen's student, Rabbi Edwin Friedman in his classic work *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (Guilford Press, 1985.)

Friedman helped us understand the complexity of emotional relationships by teaching that the basic unit of relationship is the triangle. As a couple relate to one another, or as a clergy relates to a congregation, there are always other people, things and issues that influence those relationships. (Pages 35 ff.)

Take, for example, a man and woman who are married to one another. If their relationship had no outside pressures or influences, it would look like figure 1, below. They would relate only to each other and nothing would ever cause their relationship to change.



Figure 1.

But figure 1 does not describe reality. There are many people, groups and issues that influence their relationship. Some will put pressure on it, others will enrich it and still others will do both. Figure 2 shows that their relationship is a complex of triangles involving family, work, money, vacations and more. Each of the triangles represents a facet of their relationship. The actual number of triangles is infinite, and some are more significant than others.

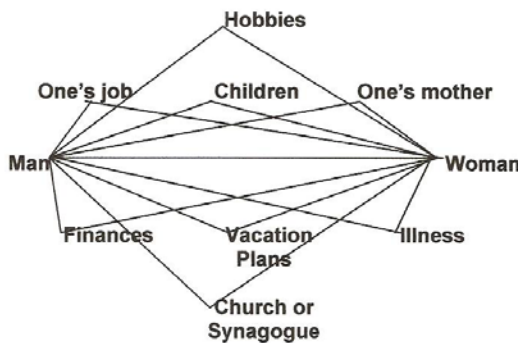


Figure 2.

Triangles are formed by the interaction of any three people, groups or issues, and a similar diagram could represent the relationship between a congregation and its clergy, or even between each member of the congregation and the clergy. Examples of the third points of the various triangles - the factors influencing their relationship - might be other people, various committees, worship, music, youth programming, a wedding and even the other congregations to which members once belonged.

The case below describes the relationship between a couple and their new pastor. The emotional triangles involve their former pastor, the woman's cancer and their move to a new community.

Ed and Heidi had moved to a new community in the same metropolitan area. They had started to become active at First Church when Heide was diagnosed with breast cancer. Their new pastor, Sam Robertson, liked them, and was deeply touched by Heidi's diagnosis. She was in a hospital in a somewhat distant suburb, but he visited her weekly, and sometimes more often. As much as he did, however, he sensed tension with Ed, and finally he asked Ed about it.

Ed immediately began to compare Sam to Jim Carson, their former pastor. Jim's church was closer to the hospital than First Church, and he knew that Heide had been admitted. Still, Jim had not seen Ed or Heide since they moved from his community, and did not visit Heide in the hospital. Nevertheless, Ed was upset with Sam.

Sam recognized that Ed was upset with Jim and that he, Sam, was being drawn into the relationship as the third point of a triangle. "Look, Ed," he said, "I am very fond of you and Heide, and I'm glad to be your pastor. But I know that you were very close to Jim, and I don't want to replace him in your lives. I'm glad that you feel close to him."

This response pulled Sam out of the triangle. In a few months Ed and Heide relegated Jim to their past and stopped comparing Sam to him.

Friedman and Bowen taught that anxiety is a driving force in triangles, and that anxious people will try to draw in third parties, creating new triangles. Ed, feeling anxious about Heidi's cancer and abandoned by his former pastor, tried to draw Sam into the triangle. Sam made it clear that he would remain in touch with Ed and Heide, but that he was not part of their relationship with Jim.

As new triangles are created, there are at least two reasons clergy are frequent targets of these efforts. To begin with, while in some societies the primary role of clergy is to impose religious standards, North American clergy are most often seen in their pastoral role. People believe they are sympathetic, and expect their pastors and rabbis to take their sides.

In addition, clergy are thought to be moral authorities. It is expected that their support will have significant impact on the outcome of any issue or dispute.

For these reasons, those involved in disputes will try to get their rabbis or ministers to take their sides. And clergy - inclined to be peacemakers - will jump in, hoping to resolve the disputes. In the words of an old song, fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

### **An impossible task.**

Unfortunately, being drawn into a triangle is rarely productive. Expanding on the concept of triangles, the late Edwin Friedman taught that we can not influence a relationship we are not a part of, and any attempt to do so may have unintended consequences. In his classic work, *Generation to Generation* (Guilford Press, 1985) he wrote,

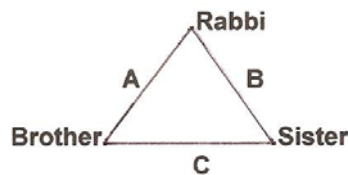
Attempts to change the relationship of the other two sides of an emotional triangle not only are generally ineffective, but also, homeostatic forces often convert these efforts to their opposite intent. Trying harder to bring two people closer...will generally maintain or increase the distance between them. On the other hand, repeated efforts to separate...any two persons... increases the possibility that they will fall "blindly in love" with one another. (p. 37.)

In the long-running musical, *The Fantasticks* (Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt, 1959,) two neighbors wanted their children to fall in love and marry. Fearing that any encouragement on their part might discourage the young people, they built a fence between their homes and forbade the couple to see one another. Since this was musical theater, the fence was successful and the couple fell in love. Real life is not as predictable.

### **A true case.**

A rabbi found she was spending a great deal of time listening to two particular members of her congregation. They were a brother and sister who had not spoken to one another for several years. Both said that they wanted to have a better relationship with their sibling, and each blamed the other sibling for the lack of contact. The rabbi offered to mediate if they would agree to come in at the same time, but neither would agree to the meeting. Finally, she sent each of them a copy of the same letter. She explained that since they both wanted a closer relationship, they ought to get together and talk to one another. She then went on to offer some approaches she thought would be helpful.

Instead of following the rabbi's suggestions, the two siblings were angry at her for interfering in their lives. In time she restored her relationship with each of them. They never repaired their relationship with one another, but they stopped trying to put her in the middle.



As Friedman taught, the rabbi had little hope of influencing side C of the triangle. Ultimately, she was only able to influence sides A and B, the two relationships in which she was involved. When one tries to influence the third side of a triangle, the effort is rarely successful.

### **Anxiety spreads.**

It is unfortunate, but not everyone will stay out of these triangles, and that causes anxiety to spread. A Midwestern church decided to start an additional Sunday worship service with contemporary music. The usual 10:00 a.m. service remained unchanged, but some members were bothered by the addition. They feared it would take too much of the pastor's time, draw people away from the traditional service or change the nature of the congregation.

As they brought others into their triangles, the tension grew. The church's governing board had enthusiastically approved the new service, but now they became frightened and put the issue to a vote of the congregation. When the vote took place many of those present were inactive members who rarely came to worship. It was clear they did not care about the issue, but had been pushed to take sides by others. They had been forced into emotional triangles.

### **What can be done.**

Since anxious people will try to draw others into their disputes, we can offer some pragmatic advice for dealing with those anxious (and difficult) folks.

Remember, in any triangle you can only work on relationships that you are part of. The task of leaders is not to give in to anxiety or to solve other people's disputes, but to bring calm to the system. Only by reducing the anxiety and making others responsible for their own behavior can you improve systemic health.

Anxiety is contagious, and it is natural for leaders to feel it when others are upset. The leaders' task is to regulate their own anxiety. To do this we recommend the following:

**Self-differentiate.** Self-differentiation is the understanding that we are all responsible for our own behavior, and that we are not responsible for the behavior of others. It will be easier for leaders to regulate their anxiety if they know where others end and they begin; where they end and their congregations begin. You are leaders of the congregation, but you are not the congregation itself. You can only be responsible for your own behavior, and not for that of the

congregation, its members or its clergy. The failure of the congregation or its members is not your failure.

**Maintain a sense of humor and be playful.** The leaders' anxiety will only add to the anxiety of others, and imply that there is a crisis. Non-reactive leadership will add calm to the system. Humor and affectionate playfulness can help defuse tension.

**Focus on strengths and assets.** Be confident of the future of the congregation. When others fear mass resignations or believe the congregation has lost its way, it is helpful to review the congregation's assets. Listing the assets and talking about them - as well as encouraging others to list them - will put the forecasts of doom in their proper perspective.

**Stay in touch.** Leaders should listen to those who are upset, but they should not be reactive or defensive. They can listen sympathetically without agreeing, assigning blame or promising to correct perceived wrongs. Staying in touch is not always easy or pleasant. Sometimes those we need to be in touch with are the people our guts tell us to avoid. On the other hand, the contact is almost always easier than the anticipation of contact.

**Stay on track.** When the goals of the congregation have been established and the decisions have been made appropriately, the leaders should move toward those goals and the implementation of those decisions. Anxious people should not be allowed to derail the process, even when they threaten that "everyone is upset," or that "all the old members/major donors are leaving the congregation."

**Interpret received communications as you wish.** You have the right, and can develop the skill to interpret any communication. You may decide if the person is angry or just having a bad day; if the anger is at you or just being expressed to you; if a question is a request for information or a hostile attack. With practice, this can become a very powerful tool.

**Avoid secrets.** Giving "secret information" to a leader is a way of sharing anxiety and bringing him into a triangle. If you sense this is happening, stop the other person immediately with a comment such as "Before you go on, you should know that if you tell me anything about Sally (the pastor or rabbi) I'll feel compelled to tell her. She has the right to know what is being said."

And finally:

**Be Gracious.** Be truthful, but not nasty.