

Why we step back and look at the big picture

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I was working with a church. They had gone through a number of pastors, wearing them out like cheap socks. The ones who seemed to last the longest had awkward tendencies—inappropriate relationship boundaries, the inability to get to meetings on time, irregular work schedules, and the hint of mouthwash masking something with a much higher alcohol content. The person in that position always seemed to have a martini lunch, as if he were on the set of *Mad Men*.

We were dealing with the latest issues, as the pastor kept appearing uninvited at the homes of employees with some sort of personal crisis. We kept trying to get our heads around the problem, by looking at the individual psychological makeup of the pastor.

Then someone explained to us how churches could take up the same characteristics of families who deal with alcoholism. And so, we began to think of the issue as a system of enabling, hiding, and coping, instead of just one person with a problem. The employee, after all, was just the latest person to fill a role in the unhealthy organization. When we began to understand that the role was that of the drunk daddy, it all made sense.

Often, it's important to understand the dysfunctions at church as systems. We know this. Most of us learn this in seminary. But then we get caught up in things, and it all feels so *personal*. So it's good to remind ourselves of the reasons why systemic thinking makes sense.

1) **We can get a clearer understanding of the problem.** Sometimes issues are between individuals, but other times we need to step back and look at the bigger picture. Are there patterns? Are there unjust systems in place?

Jim Crow happened, not because one man lynched another man, but because there was a whole network of laws, attitudes and culture in place that nurtured racial

oppression. Seeing the big picture allowed for better solutions in the Civil Rights movement.

In the present Civil Rights movement, tools like Twitter can allow white people to see the bigger patterns. So while the news of one African-American man being shot might have elicited a sorrowful headshake and an admonishment to not run, seeing the pattern of shootings by police and vigilantes makes us realize we need a whole new system.

2) **We can stop the victim blaming.** If we think of things as systems, then we can do less victim blaming—especially if we are the victims.

If you're a young woman being sexually harassed by an elderly parishioner and your complaints to the personnel committee are met with laughter, you can stop beating yourself up for not handling the situation well enough. You're not alone. It's not what you wore or didn't wear.

Or if you're serving a church and you're getting attacked, do some healthy self-reflection. Talk to a friend or counselor who's not afraid to tell you the truth. If the bashing is unfounded, then relax. Don't lean in, work harder or be smarter. Look in the mirror and say, "This is not about me." Realize it's not up to you to prance for bullies. Read about Queen Vashti and stand strong.

3) **We can create solidarity.** If you're a woman and/or a person of color who's getting paid less, then it's really hard to advocate for your own salary on an individual basis, because even though it may be a one-to-one conversation, you're up against a system that's much bigger than you. Not to mention, you rely on that system for your calling and income.

But if we can create solidarity around systems of inequity, then it might become easier. If together we can point out that women and people of color get paid less than those with more privilege, then we might be able to create some change.

Why do corporations spend millions to try to bust up unions? Because solidarity is so much more powerful. We are often one person trying to stand against two thousand years of oppression. We have to do this together.

4) **Imagining a way of love.** In our most devastating struggles, we still need to be good colleagues. We need to stand before a congregation with dogged

determination and be their pastor, even if there are rumblings of a coup d'etat. We need to pray for that person before surgery, even if she tried to knife us in the back the week before. We are called to a forgiveness and peace that includes loving our enemies.

So, when we begin to think of things systemically, we can have compassion for the clueless colleague who doesn't understand his constant microaggressions. He doesn't know he's being sexist, because sexism is so ingrained in our culture.

Or even when we are being mistreated, we can love that the person who is trying to control or dominate us. That person is playing out a part in a larger system, and he or she may even be a victim of that system in another area of life. We can love that person, even while we're working hard to dismantle the system in which we both participate.

When I write, "imagine a way of love," please don't think that I'm saying you must play nice, be friends, or stop being so angry. I am saying when we're ready to have the courage to love our enemies, we can. It won't betray our cause or our calling to forgive. And, it might even help us dismantle the crushing cruelties of dysfunction, racism, and patriarchy.