

RECOGNISING
**EMOTIONAL
PROCESS**



SESSION 6
HANDOUTS

SESSION 6

RECOGNISING EMOTIONAL PROCESS



Introduction

This session introduces the idea that we experience unconscious emotional process within groups, including within the Church. The challenge is to recognise such emotional process. The session also explores the related challenge of managing ourselves when we experience intense or powerful emotions.

Session Objectives

- To identify the reality of unconscious emotional process within a group.
- To recognise that such emotional process can affect how people behave.
- To face the challenge of managing ourselves when powerful emotions arise with the potential to overwhelm us.
- To develop a plan to address this challenge of managing ourselves better.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the session participants will have:

- Listened to and reflected on a contemporary example of unconscious emotional process in a congregation, and how one pastor handled this.
- Identified a personal example of an unconscious emotional process.
- Named the behaviour by one pastor who models responding constructively in the face of his own anger.
- Considered three typical negative reactions when people are anxious, and acknowledged which of these is a personal tendency.
- Heard four key principles for managing oneself better when facing anxiety in a group, and identified one of these to work on personally.
- Developed a personal plan for how to apply one of the four principles when facing anxiety in a group.

Overview of Session Segments

| | |
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| Welcome: | Arrival and introduction |
| Way in: | Introducing emotional process through a story |
| Explore 1: | Commending positive behaviour when angry |
| Explore 2: | Identifying emotional process in our experience |
| Pointer 1: | Considering some typical reactive behaviour when anxious |
| Pointer 2: | Mature responses when facing anxiety |
| Explore 3: | Developing a plan for a mature response when anxious |
| Review: | Looking back over the session |
| Feedback: | Completing written feedback |

Handouts

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|------------|--|
| Handout 1: | Introduction and overview of Session 6 |
| Handout 2: | The power of feelings |
| Handout 3: | The power of feelings: positive behaviour when angry |
| Handout 4: | When anxious or upset |
| Handout 5: | Principles for mature responses |
| Handout 6: | Feedback form for participants (for return to course leader) |

THE POWER OF FEELINGS

By William M Kondrath



The first position I took as a lead pastor was in a suburban congregation with two Sunday services and a combined attendance of 140 people. The parish had always had male senior pastors until the female interim pastor, who was the minister immediately before my arrival. Three women had served as associate clergy during the tenure of the two previous pastors.

When I was hired, the parish search profile said that the congregation wanted and needed more than one professional minister. The budget had funds designated for a part-time youth minister with the expectation that we would hire someone in that role shortly after my arrival. After six months, funds became available to sustain a 25-hour-per-week position. The church council made the decision to hire an assistant pastor. I informed the leadership that all other things being equal, I would prefer hiring a woman. I seemed to have the support of the church council because a woman as preacher and worship leader would complement my ministry in those roles.

I was excited about the prospect of having a colleague. The amount of work was growing, and the liturgical, pastoral, and outreach demands were considerable. The lay leaders and I had begun to review applications and schedule interviews. And then it happened.

A church member who had served in various capacities at the church for more than 40 years wrote a letter to the church council. She placed the letter in all the council members' mailboxes at the church, intentionally omitting my mailbox. The letter was five pages long, handwritten, and signed. It made a strong case for a youth minister and then demanded that this person not be a clergyperson and not serve as assistant minister. It said that I had not been pastor long enough to deserve an assistant and that, as we knew from politics, senior people hired assistants to do their work for them. I was smart enough to know that this letter was not about me, and yet I was still enraged. What happened at the church council meeting only made me angrier.

Though we had a lot of other business on the agenda, the church council spent more than two hours discussing this woman's letter. During the discussion, a few people began to discuss the fact that the previous pastor's work had overlapped with the work of one of the assistants. They noted that both the pastor and the assistant occasionally visited a hospitalised parishioner together. They suggested that this was an unnecessary duplication of ministry. I agreed and said that it would never occur to me to have two clergy make a visit at the same time to a hospitalised parishioner, though we might alternate visits. Several other issues were raised and examined. In the end, the council decided to continue with the hiring process.

I had spoken very little during the meeting. This was the first bump in the road since I had begun serving this congregation. I was quiet in part because I wanted to listen and to observe how the members of the church council would deal with this issue. I suspected that I would learn more at this meeting about the health of the congregation and the competence of the lay leadership than I had learned in the entire six months that I had been at the church.

At the end of the meeting, I told them that I had learned a great deal during the discussion and that there were some significant things that puzzled me. Primarily, I was puzzled as to how they had allowed one person to hijack more than two hours of their time. I cautioned that if the church council continued to criticise their own carefully thought-out decisions in this way, we were in store for a lot of long, unproductive meetings.

I asked them if they would be willing to meet the next week for two hours with only one agenda item: to talk about how they had come to criticise their decision and to allow their regular agenda to be taken over. I said I had some ideas about what had taken place, and that I wanted to learn with them about how to prevent this from happening again. With less reluctance than I had anticipated, they agreed to meet.

When the church council met the following week, a palpable tension was in the air. I suspected council members were embarrassed that they had spent so much time discussing the letter from the disgruntled member. Perhaps some were also angry that I had called them to account. I thought that this might be a watershed meeting, and I feared the water might be a tsunami that would wash away my credibility with the council. I was also excited. I thought that if things went well, we would establish a deeper working relationship.

When the meeting began, I asked the council members if they could tell me how it was that they had let go of their agenda for the previous meeting and spent more than two hours talking about the letter. After a variety of comments, I asked them if they would be willing to entertain another explanation. They wanted to hear my idea.

I explained that when I was interviewed for the position of pastor, I did some research. I found out that the pastor that preceded me got divorced about a year before he resigned from the church and took another job. Two years later, just before I was hired, he got married to one of his former assistants. They, of course, knew the story. The pastor before him had broken his marriage and ordination vows by becoming involved in a relationship with a parishioner, thus abusing the trust placed in him as her pastor. He was forced to leave the parish by the denomination. They knew that story as well.

I said that I thought the resistance to hiring an assistant was because most people knew I would likely hire a woman, all other things being equal. I said I believed that people were afraid that I would divorce my wife, leave my two small children, and marry the newly-hired female assistant.

The first response to my statement was a nervous 'You've got to be kidding,' sort of laughter from many in the group. I said that I really believed fear was behind the letter. After I explained my hunch by giving some examples to the group one man said, 'It didn't occur to me at all until you mentioned it. But now I think you may be on to something. At least we ought to talk about it.' And so we did, for nearly two hours.

This story is an illustration of the power of feelings and the tendency of most groups to ignore feelings and focus on intellectual or cognitive explanations for nearly everything. It might be that the anger directed at me by the long-time parishioner was not simply misdirected anger that was meant for the former pastor. She may have been substituting anger for sadness or fear. It may be that this woman was sad that she had lost a beloved pastor. She may have felt scared that it would happen again. The council may also have been trying to keep peace. They were certainly working very hard to find a way to placate the author of the letter without dealing with any of their own fears, anger, or sadness.

As a result of that follow-up meeting where we explored the feelings behind the letter and the council's response, we were transformed into a tighter community of individuals and worked more effectively. Church council meetings that had lasted three-and-a-half hours under previous pastors rarely went beyond two hours. A woman assistant was hired within the month. The focus of her ministry was youth work. She and I both made hospital visits, but not together. She and I are still happily married – but not to each other!

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THE POWER OF FEELINGS

Positive Behaviour When Angry



In the story 'The Power of Feelings', we might affirm the following from how William Kondrath handled himself when he was angry:

- He was in touch with his feelings (I was... enraged), and identified them in the moment – yet also managed them and didn't react inappropriately. (This can be difficult to do when one is angry.)
- He was observant and watching what was happening without diving in too quickly. He was seeing what he might learn.
- He was brave and took a risk in addressing the problematic council meeting directly, and proposing a conversation about what had happened.
- He faced into a challenging conversation – and did so at an appropriate time, after a cue had been provided by something problematic that happened in the council meeting.
- He started the special meeting by inviting others' comments and observations about what had happened at the previous council meeting. He didn't rush in with his analysis.
- After hearing from others, he asked whether people were interested to hear another possible explanation. He didn't force his possible insights on others, but checked whether people were open to receiving his ideas.
- He was direct and honest in offering his theory about the fears within the church, which had been expressed so negatively by the author of the letter. You might say that he 'named an elephant in the room' – by identifying something challenging which wouldn't usually have been discussed so openly.
- He had done some significant research. This showed that he understood that past history will often play into current events; and it showed that he recognised how important it is to understand past history and its possible impact today.

WHEN ANXIOUS OR UPSET



- Don't **attack**.
- Don't **defend**.
- Don't **withdraw**.

All three of these typical reactions are worth avoiding, because they are likely to increase the tension.

Instead, it is worth aiming to:

- **Manage yourself:** be attentive to your own reactions, without dumping them on others.
- **Check your understanding** of what the other person is expressing.
- **Wait before responding** until the other person is ready to listen to your perspective.
- **Define yourself in a clear and positive way** rather than in reaction to the other person.
- **Stay open to the other person**, and maintain on-going contact with them over time; avoid distancing yourself.

MATURE RESPONSES WHEN FACING ANXIETY



Family Systems Theory, developed by American psychiatrist, Dr Murray Bowen, suggests four essential principles for responding in a mature way when we are facing anxiety and tensions in a group. They are:

1. Foster a Non-Anxious Presence (or at Least a Less Anxious One!)

When differences emerge in a group, and someone says or does something we don't like, this can create anxiety within ourselves and among group members. When we're anxious we may feel that we have to react or have to escape in some way.

We provide a non-anxious presence, not by detaching from our own and others' emotions, nor by ignoring difficult issues, but by engaging with them without retreating or attacking. We stay present and engaged.

We behave in a non-anxious way when we engage fully with one person's view and then another different view, while managing our own anxiety. We allow differences, hurts, feelings, and challenging issues to be expressed and explored from diverse viewpoints in a responsive rather than reactive way. This is the opposite of being uptight and tense.

2. Offer and Invite Self-Definition

It can be difficult for us to openly define ourselves in a clear, positive way, rather than in negative reaction to others. Too often we can wait for others to say where they stand first, and then define ourselves in reaction to them.

In groups, when we are waiting for others to define themselves, and we are unable to define ourselves clearly and openly, we can end up feeling stuck or lost in the group. We're worried because we're simply not sure how others think and feel.

Healthy self-definition occurs when I openly express:

- What I think, believe and feel.
- What I need from and can give to others.
- What I hope for and where I feel disillusioned.

Once I offer my own self-definition, it's important that I invite such self-definition from others, making clear that I don't expect others to agree with me, but am glad to hear where they stand – and that I mean it!

3. Maintain Emotional Contact

When we disagree with, or experience conflict with another person, a common reaction is to distance ourselves and avoid that person in some way. When we are anxious, angry or hurt, we generally move away from the source of our anxiety by moving away from the other person. This distancing of ourselves can take either a physical or an emotional shape – or both.

To restore a relationship, to make good decisions, and to handle conflict constructively, we need to find a way to maintain emotional contact with others whom we perceive as disagreeing with, blocking, or rejecting us in some way.

As a general rule, we will do well if we note anxiety and move towards it, maintaining emotional contact with others, especially when things are more difficult between us.

4. Stand Firm in Yourself When the Going Gets Tough

Sometimes, when one provides clear self-differentiation, combining the above elements, especially if we are proposing a change of some kind, we will then experience resistance and pressure to move back to the way things were.

The challenge for us at this point is to stand firm, to hold onto our convictions and sense of direction, while being flexible and willing to adapt in the light of others' genuine concerns. This adaptation needs to be done without giving in on one's convictions, values and vision – unless these are being appropriately challenged or brought into question by others.

So this principle is not about getting entrenched in our positions. It is about holding onto our core convictions and values, in an appropriate and flexible way, without wilting under pressure from others.

SESSION 6

RECOGNISING EMOTIONAL PROCESS



Participant Feedback Form

Please complete this form at the end of the session. Thank you.

1. Please circle your evaluation of the following aspects of the session where 1=Unhelpful and 6=Very Helpful:

A. The content provided in the session 1 2 3 4 5 6

B. The way the session enabled you to learn 1 2 3 4 5 6

C. How your leaders led and facilitated the session 1 2 3 4 5 6

D. How participants worked and interacted together 1 2 3 4 5 6

E. THE SESSION OVERALL 1 2 3 4 5 6

2. What you most appreciated or found helpful about the session was:

3. One thing you see yourself applying or using from the session is:

4. What you would change or like to be different about the session (either the content, or the way learning was facilitated, or both) was:

Thank you for taking the time to complete this feedback form.

GROUP:

COURSE LEADERS:

SESSION 6

RECOGNISING EMOTIONAL PROCESS



Course Leader's Feedback Form

Please complete a form at the end of each session. Please respond to question 5 after reading your participants' feedback forms. Thank you.

1. Please circle your evaluation of the following aspects of the session where 1=Unhelpful and 6=Very Helpful:

| | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A. Guidance provided in the Leader's Guide | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| B. PowerPoint slides, handouts, scripts and other materials | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| C. Quality and appropriateness of the content | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| D. Process offered for presenting content and enabling learning | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| E. How you led and facilitated this session | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| F. How participants worked and interacted together in this session | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| G. THE SESSION OVERALL | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

2. What you most appreciated or found helpful about the materials provided for you was:

Thank you for taking time to complete this feedback form. Please then scan it as a PDF file, and email it to Bridge Builders:
bb@bbministries.org.uk

Only send the course leaders' feedback form.

Bridge Builders will seek to improve Growing Bridgebuilders in the light of feedback from all the course leaders.

COURSE LEADERS:

LOCATION:

GROUP SIZE:

TYPE OF PARTICIPANTS:

3. What you most struggled with in leading the session was:

4. What you would change or like to be different about the materials provided for you is:
(Note: this could relate either to the content, or to the process for facilitating learning, or both)

5. Having read all the participants' feedback comments what you would most draw attention to is:

6. Any other comments: