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From Stuck to Unstuck: Overcoming Congregational Impasse

Kenneth A. Halstead

Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 1998

187 pages, \$29.00 Softcover

Kenneth A. Halstead, having served three parishes in Illinois and Wisconsin, is a Lutheran campus pastor at Bemidji State University in Minnesota. He is also a family therapist, a clinical member of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists. In his acknowledgements, he pays tribute to Peter Steinke "for offering useful and challenging critique on the manuscript"; I find this helpful in that I regard this book as a companion to Peter Steinke's *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (1996), and I would recommend that they be read together.

"This book is concerned mainly with the things we do (or avoid doing) in our congregations to solve emotional issues – conflict, anger, anxiety, hurt, fear, jealousy, frustration, confusion. What we do, especially in response to emotions, can determine whether the love- and life-giving energy of God is loosed or blocked by our attempts to make things better" (vii-ix).

"It is the thesis of this book that stuckness is not primarily the result of stubborn or bad people, or even of lack of technique or of faulty formal structure. Rather stuckness is primarily the result of well-intended attempted solutions [that is, ingrained ideas and habits about how to solve problems] built into the rules and structure of the system – solutions that create life-draining feedback loops" (4).

As a pastor and a family therapist, the author draws heavily on family systems theory in order to explore how congregations can be helped to move from being stuck to becoming unstuck. He uses in particular the Brief Therapy Model that came out of the Mental Research Institute (MRI), drawing parallels between family systems and congregational systems. Like Steinke, Halstead asserts that each congregation is an emotional system. "Once they are unstuck, emotional systems like families and congregations have a tremendous capacity for love, flexibility, and creativity" (ix). "Systemic Brief Therapy models were designed to solve people's problems as efficiently as possible, preferably in only a few sessions, usually by actively intervening and building on strengths" (xiii).

"The metaphor of 'stuckness' lends itself to a systems understanding that looks at how the whole group works together, for better or worse. It points to pragmatic action we can pursue together without wasting time and energy on blame or shame" (6). The metaphor stuckness "implies that God is already at work but that we are blocking God's creative love; that our task is not to try harder but to get out of the Spirit's way and encourage rather than quench the Spirit's

working in our midst” (6). “Determining whether a congregation is stuck is less a matter of establishing fact than of discerning if using the label will help you get unstuck together” (13).

In his “Introduction,” Halsteadt notes: “Parts of this book are demanding, especially the early chapters. I trust that readers will be patient and persistent” (xv). This is one reader who both agrees with the author and notes that patience did pay off. The first seven chapters are heavy going – very theoretical; it isn’t until the eighth chapter, entitled “The MRI Brief Therapy Skills” that Halsteadt really applies the theory. From that point on the book’s contents become very practical and contextual. As a reader, I wish he had not made me wait so long! I’m not convinced that the theoretical foundations needed as much space and attention as the author gives them.

Chapter 10 is well worth waiting for. It is entitled “Prevention of Stuckness” and does an excellent job of leading the reader into the shortcomings of “linear cause and effect thinking” and into the realities and benefits of “circularity” (systems):

- a) Seeing reality is always in process rather than static.
- b) Valuing diversity.
- c) Affirming partnership and mutuality.
- d) Embracing paradoxes.
- e) Opening and encouraging life-giving feedback loops.
- f) Living webs of interconnection and interdependence (161).

The author goes on: “Organic, systemic processes are dynamic, curvy, diverse, interdependent, spiraling, embracing both/and, going back to go forward, growing, flowing, and developing through time. Leaders in the new paradigm must learn to use a more systemic style to help congregations stay unstuck. They must learn the paradox that we need to lead in curves and circles to move forward” (161).

Consider these precious insights from Chapter 11 – “Theological Blockbusters” is what Halsteadt calls them:

1. The more we fight for complete control and grasp for it, the deeper the binds we create and the tighter their hold on us. Freedom comes through letting go and letting God.
2. The more we try to simplify life into neat little boxes of either/or and to make it fit some absolute standard, the more we choke and distort it. All of life is an ambiguous mix.
3. We, though only creatures, are created in God’s image. Blaming others for our problems may make us feel less burdened for a time, but blaming degrades us and keeps us from dealing with our real burdens.

4. The harder we try to become spiritual, the less human we tend to be, and the less spiritual in the truest sense. The harder we try to rescue others, the less genuinely loving we tend to become because we put ourselves in the role of saviors rather than of fellow strugglers supporting one another.
5. God's saving action is revealed in ways quite opposite to what we would expect by reason and common sense. The supreme example is the cross. God both communicates and intervenes in paradoxical ways at the most crucial points.
6. The harder we try to save ourselves, the more stuck we are. Salvation comes by grace alone. This, I believe, is the ultimate therapeutic paradox (174-176).

Together with other family systems theorists, Halstead affirms: "To help a system get unstuck, it is generally most practical to start with oneself" (10). Indeed! This is a book which needs to be read and re-read as well as used in practice. There is much in this text which reminds me of Thomas Groome and his articulation of the "praxis" approach in *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (1980). Each chapter in Halstead's book has at the end a set of reflective and searching discussion questions. I found these questions to be perceptive and penetrating. An excellent bibliography is included in the book.

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