Deepening Emotional Capacity

Session Eight

Online 2020-21

Excellence in LEADERSHIP

Rocky Mountain Synod, ELCA

Courageous, resilient, and faithful leaders for the sake of the world

Deepening Emotional Capacity

Session Eight Participant Outcomes:

1. Describe insights from summer projects and share them with the group.
2. Practice empathy skills in relationships.
3. Give and receive feedback.
4. Journal insights on your family of origin and how it affects you in daily interactions.

Preparation for this Session:

- Read this section of the manual and bring it with you.
- Meet with your ministry team to prepare insights you wish to share with the group about your summer project.
- Review the material on "Feedback" found in Session 3, p. 10, of your manual (Becoming Connected, Adaptive Leaders/Disciples).
- Construct a genogram of your family of origin.
- Optional: Read *Dare to Lead* by Brené Brown.

Found in this Session:

REV 7.30.20

Appropriate Empathy

What is Empathy?

Appropriate empathy is a self-differentiated connection with people on an emotional level. Empathy is named one of the sub-categories of emotional intelligence under the heading of Interpersonal.[1] Without empathy, real connection with other people is not possible.

In *Dare to Lead* (p. 140), Brené Brown says that "empathy is not connecting to an experience, it's connecting to the emotions that underpin an experience." She goes on to say that empathy is a vulnerable choice because we have to connect to something within ourselves that knows that feeling. It's the connection that is healing.

Dan Goleman, in *Emotional Intelligence* (p. 96), says that "empathy builds on self-awareness; the more open we are to our own emotions, the more skilled we will be in reading feelings of others."

> *"When compassion wakes up within us, we find ourselves more willing to become vulnerable, to take the risk of entering the pain of others."*
> *Sue Monk Kidd,* Firstlight, *p. 75*

So what is differentiated connection? Differentiated connection is the lynch pin in healthy relationships. Human beings need this type of connection so that we don't get caught up in the quagmire of emotions – our own and someone else's! Boundaries are critical here. We MUST know where we end and another person begins. We MUST know our hooks, our vulnerabilities, and our own places of shame. We MUST know our hot buttons and deep wounds. AND we MUST be able to navigate our own impulses, reactivity, stress, and emotional self-awareness to connect appropriately. Healthy relationships are tricky business and why self-awareness and self-differentiation are so very important in expressing appropriate empathy.

Empathy Misses (from *Dare to Lead* pp. 152- 155)

As we attend to our everyday conversations, we begin to realize there are many ways we and those around us get caught thinking we are being empathetic when actually we are missing the mark. Brené Brown, in her book *Dare to Lead*, names six common 'empathy misses' that may help us become more aware of our day to day interaction.

1. **Sympathy vs. Empathy**: Empathy is different than sympathy. Empathy is feeling **<u>with</u>** someone in their situation, whereas sympathy is feeling **<u>for</u>** someone and their situation. Empathy is NOT concerned with fixing a person or situation. It is about being with someone in their struggle. As Brené Brown says, we should not race to turn the light on so we can feel better, rather we should stay with them in their darkness. Empathy says: "I know this struggle and you're not alone." Sympathy says: "Wow! That's pretty bad. I feel sorry for you."

[1] Session One (Laying the Foundation), p. 12.

2. **Gasp and Awe**: Sometimes we hear someone's story and we feel shame on their behalf. "O God, I'd just die if that happened to me!" Gasp and awe happens when our own emotions get hijacked, and instead of identifying with our companion we make the story about us. With this miss we are no longer empathizing with them, but we get caught up in our own imagination and judgment.

3. **The Mighty Fall**: Sometimes when we hear someone's story, we are shocked because it doesn't fit our impression of them, it disappoints us, and our reaction lets them know it disappoints us. We may say something like: "I never expected that from you. What happened?" The other person easily becomes defensive and needs to reposition themselves to recover your respect. We then have lost the opportunity for real connection.

4. **The Block and Tackle**: This empathy miss happens when we are uncomfortable with the level of pain in a particular situation. We are using the 'block and tackle' when we try to deflect our own discomfort by blaming the one telling the story. Statements like: "What were you thinking?" and "How could you let that happen?" convey to the other person that they are in error and should have handled the situation differently. Another example of this kind of deflection is blaming another person in the story. Misdirecting statements such as, "Who does that guy think he is?" and "How dare he do that to you?" are signals of this empathy miss. In these statements we can hear the potential of unhelpful triangulating.

5. **The Boots and Shovel**: This miss happens when we try to minimize our companion's feelings, saying, "It's not that bad." Or the miss may happen when we bluster and can't bring ourselves to name how difficult the situation truly is. We sometimes use this tactic when our goal is to simply make the person feel better or when we want to gloss over their pain because of our own discomfort. The problem is that it does not allow us to connect with the person's real feelings.

6. **One-up**: Sometimes we miss true empathy by trying to grab the attention away from our companion, saying, "If you think that's bad, let me tell you about…" Comparing and competing should not be confused with true empathy. An authentic "me too," is feeling **with** someone. "Yeah, I know what you mean," allows the other person to not feel alone. Sharing your more devasting story at their tender moment is an empathy miss.

Empathy misses often happen when we, ourselves, are struggling to stay grounded and mindful, uneasy about allowing our discomfort to teach us.

Group Leadership and Empathy

In emotional systems such as our faith communities, appropriate empathy or self-differentiated empathy is very important. It is healing and healthy to connect and name what is happening in the group at an emotional level. A good example of this connection happens during a major transition.

Naming the grief and offering appropriate ways to navigate the emotions allows the community to grow together and form bonds that will help the community thrive into the future. Remember to be aware of those within the group who are less self-aware and self-differentiated. Encourage everyone to take responsibility for their own grief work.

Edwin Freidman, in *Failure of Nerve* (p. 134), warns against some of the pitfalls of inappropriate empathy in groups:

- **Focus on weakness or immaturity rather than on strength:** The danger here is that the group will allow the weak and immature members to set the bar for group functioning. Focusing on those who are needy, with what seems like empathy, is actually an empathy miss. This focus will not allow the group, or the hurting individuals, to move to an adaptive resolution. Appropriate empathy connects and communicates understanding at an emotional level AND focuses on the strengths within the group to deal with the situation.

- **Self-awareness and self-differentiation:** Leaders, especially pastoral leaders, tend to focus on other people's feelings more than their own. Appropriate empathy calls for leaders to be aware of their own feelings, while connecting to others in their struggles. Healthy leadership is about maintaining our own boundaries and attending to our own emotions for the sake of a healthier community.

- **Avoiding issues of personal accountability and responsibility:** Churches often get hooked feeling sorry for people in difficult situations and avoid holding them accountable for their part in the situation. Appropriate empathy includes creating and holding space for all emotions, not just easy and socially acceptable emotions, so that people can work toward health and wholeness. Sometimes, out of a misguided sense of sympathy, faith communities can get caught defending people's bad behavior instead of holding everyone accountable for mutual respect and appropriate behavior.

- **Allowing the weak and immature to hold the group hostage:** How often have we been in groups where one person, or small group, refuses to go along with a plan the rest of the group has decided is best? Deep listening and attempting to understand their issues is critical, yet we cannot allow the process to be stalled. Strong leaders show both compassion and the capacity to make life-giving decisions for the sake of the whole community.

- **Going for the quick fix and empathy misses listed above:** We all want to resolve the anxiety around us in a challenging situation, however, the best solution may take time to ripen or reveal itself. The quick fix is especially tempting in empathy situations. Appropriate empathy requires leaders be **with** the struggling person or group, and not try to make the pain go away artifically.

Developing empathy skills in groups will equip leaders to navigate difficult community issues, yet refrain from taking over the problem. Everyone can cultivate the necessary resiliency to move through darker times together and come out stronger.

Empathy Skills

> *"You don't arbitrarily make up your mind to be compassionate so much as you choose to follow a journey that transforms your heart into a compassionate space. Compassion, which is the life of God within us, comes through a slow and often difficult metamorphisis deep within the human soul."*
> *Sue Monk Kidd*, Firstlight, *p. 69*

Learning appropriate empathy skills is key to being able to negotiate healthy group dynamics and pastoral leadership. We deepen our own emotional capacity when we learn to practice appropriate empathy. Brené Brown, in *Dare to Lead* (pp. 143-149), outlines five empathy skills. These five skills are interwoven, and yet teasing them out individually allows us to look closer at our own capacity while we practice healthy relationships in our community settings.

1. **Perspective Taking**: This skill is about learning to see the world as others see it, and not just as we see it. The difficulty is, how we see the world is very often ingrained in our unconscious. We believe at some level that my truth is THE truth. Individuals, especially people with privilege, tend to norm the rest of the world on 'me and my' perspectives. Embedded in our unconscious assumptions are cultural, generational, spiritual, ethnic, racial, and other biases. In order to grow in empathy, we must practice perspective taking. We need to take the stance of being a 'learner' about another point of view rather than a 'knower' of the truth as we see it. Curiosity drives us to learn more about another person's story and perspective.

2. **Nonjudgmental**: Because of our unconscious biases, we all must practice the empathy skill of nonjudgment. Striving for healthy relationship means we all need to be aware of the places we get hooked in judging others. Connecting with someone at an emotional level is difficult if we ourselves are hooked in judgment. Our own shame and deep struggle obstructs real connection. We tend not to judge others in areas where we have strong self-regard and confidence. We tend to judge others in areas where we have more insecurity and apprehension. This skill is about catching ourselves in the temptation to judge and in developing our EQ and self-awareness in order to let go of unhelpful judgment.

3. **Understand another person's feelings**: To understand another's feelings, we actually need to begin with understanding our own feelings by becoming emotionally literate. Being able to name what we are feeling helps us find compassion for what others might be feeling. Empathy for the other person helps us navigate through relationships with the greatest potential for keeping the relationship intact. The ablility to name feelings and emotions is critical in building healthy relationships with individuals and communities.

4. **Communicate your understanding of another person's feelings**: Once we've learned to name feelings in ourselves, we can better understand the feelings of others. This skill intersects well with perspective taking and is the continuation of working to understand another person's feelings. Communicating our understanding by naming a feeling we think the other person might be feeling requires sensitivity and humility. Once again, this skill is about emotional literacy, and requires the stance of being a learner, rather than a knower. Assuming you know what is going on inside the other person can be frought with potential danger. Go slow, ask a lot of questions, check back to confirm what you think you heard and be willing to own that you may have gotten it wrong.

5. **Mindfulness**: This skill is about keeping all emotions balanced, neither minimizing nor exaggerating them. Mindfulness helps us realize that emotions are neutral and are just a signal to pay attention to something. The something may be that all is right; or the something may mean something is amiss. Regardless, emotions (yours and the other person's) are internal notification about how you are responding to what is happening between the two people. Emotions are information which help us make informed and appropriate choices in our relationships.

Daring Feedback

The word "feedback" may trigger memories, experiences, and emotions from our past. Often, feedback is a mask for confrontation, or telling another person how they have screwed up. Like empathy, there are many "feedback misses." We can all probably tell stories from our families, school years, workplaces, and other times, where feedback was used inappropriately, or even as a weapon. As a result, feedback may have negative connotations. When used appropriately, however, feedback can be a gift of self-awareness and a tool to better understand how we come across to others.

In Session 3 of the manual, "Becoming Connected, Adaptive Leaders/Disciples," we practiced giving and receiving positive feedback. Page 10 of Session 3 has good information about feedback which is worth reviewing now. Remember, feedback is more about the giver of the feedback and the relationship between the giver and receiver. Feedback is about how the one receiving the feedback is coming across to the the one giving the feedback. It is about the effectiveness of the interaction.

Appropriate feedback is an opportunity to deepen a relationship and keep it healthy. Remember to keep feedback timely, clear, specific, constructive, and appropriate to the relationship. Feedback given in anger or hurt is destructive and damaging to the relationship.

The following formula is helpful in keeping feedback appropriate.

When you _____,
I felt _____,
because I _____.

Daring to give and receive feedback requires self-awareness, self-expression, self-regulation, assertiveness, courage, and compassion. Appropriate feedback requires us to be in touch with our motivation and readiness to engage in an honest and mutually vulnerable conversation. Ask yourself why this conversation is a healthy step in this relationship at this time. Conversely, when you choose to not share, you must ask yourself why; why are you choosing to withhold the conversation? Taking time to check our readiness to either give or receive feedback is key to maintaining healthy relationships. Offering feedback should not be done in anger or closed off to our own responsibility in the situation. The goal of appropriate feedback is to build up the relationship.

On the Dare to Lead website, Brené Brown offers the following checklist for readiness to give and receive feedback.

The Engaged Feedback Checklist

I know that I'm ready to give feedback when…

____ I'm ready to sit next to you rather than across from you.

____ I'm willing to put the problem in front of us rather than between us (or sliding it toward you).

____ I'm ready to listen, ask questions, and accept that I may not fully understand the issue.

____ I'm ready to acknowledge what you do well instead of picking apart your mistakes.

____ I recognize your strengths and how you can use them to address your challenges.

____ I can hold you accountable without shaming or blaming.

____ I am open to owning my part.

____ I can genuinely thank someone for their efforts rather than criticize them for their failings.

____ I can talk about how resolving these challenges will lead to growth and opportunity.

____ I can model the vulnerability and openness that I expect to see from you.

Readiness to Receive Feedback

____I am open to improving the way I come across to another person.

____I am centerd in self-regard and confidence.

____I can respond owning my emotions and part in the situation.

____I am ready to listen, ask questions, and try to understand the issue.

____I am ready to disregard pieces that are "not about me."

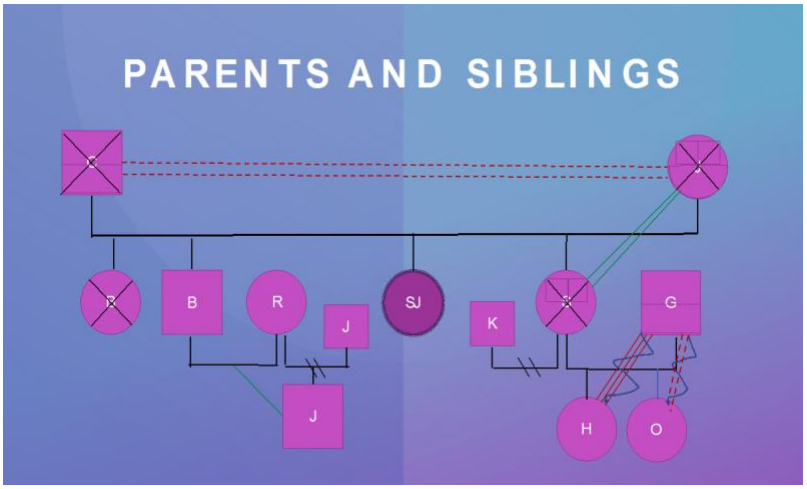
____I am ready to thank someone for daring to give feedback.

____I am ready to work on resolving the issue.

Genogram

The genogram is a thoughtful tool for examining your own family of origin, the family you grew up in. Learning about the family system that formed you often gives insights into the patterns that continue to be repeated throughout your life. This tool allows one to view the family system we grew up in from a variety of perspectives. The genogram gives us a method to collect helpful data about who and why we are. Looking at the bigger picture of your whole family system shifts your perspective from reacting to your immediate set of relationships and gives you the opportunity to view your family from a wider vantage point.

A genogram is a family diagram going back at least three generations. It charts basic data: birth and death dates, marriage dates, full names, etc., but also information about the functioning of those in the system: family relationships (separations, affairs, divorce), emotional relationships (distance, cutoff, closeness, violence, etc.), illness, addiction, medical conditions, and any nodal moments that have an effect on the system.

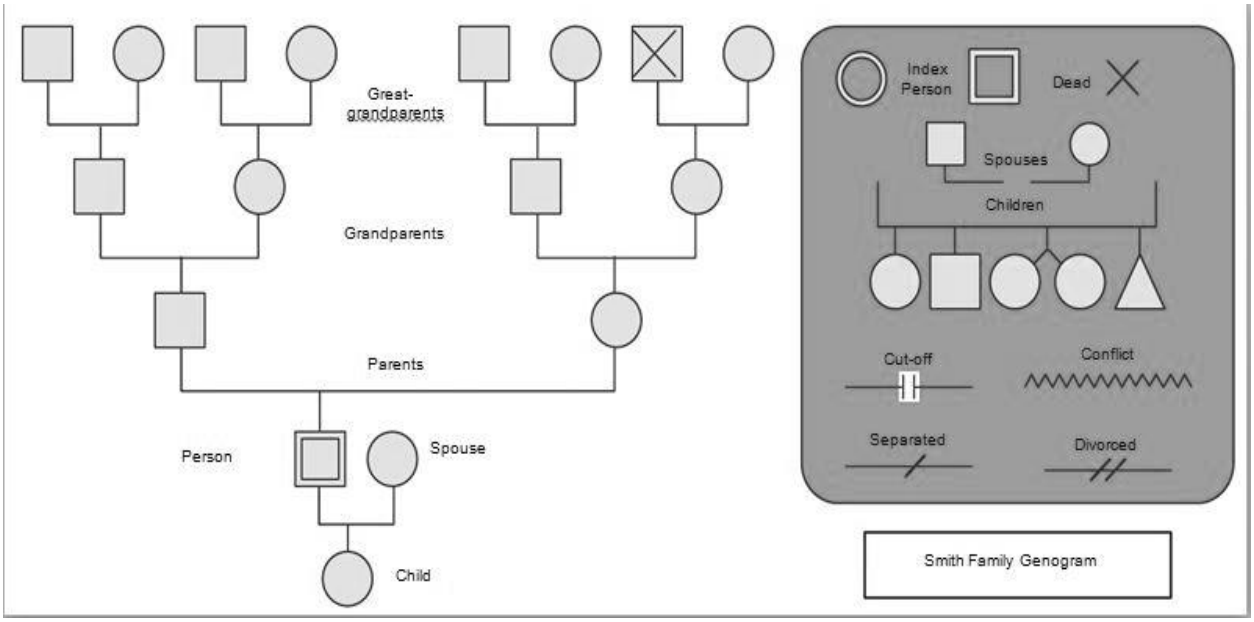


Once you begin to add data, you'll learn more about your family and how it has functioned across generations, where the anxiety is, and how the anxiety functions in your family and within your place in the system. Patterns often emerge, leading you to see things you haven't been aware of before.

Genogram Template

A genogram, then, becomes a "map" from which you can examine your family's functioning as well as your own, so that you can consider new ways of functioning from a more self-differentiated position. The genogram can also be helpful when considering how you function in other settings, like a congregational context.

The following set of symbols are used in creating a genogram. Oftentimes, the power of the genogram is in sharing your story with another person. Start by privately drawing your family system. When you feel comfortable, find a trusted friend and share your genogram. Begin to notice the patterns that emerge. A partner or friend can ask probing questions that may unlock patterns that are harder for you to see. The more you know about who you are and where you come from, the more choices you have to choose your response instead of simply reacting based on old assumptions.



Nodal Moments

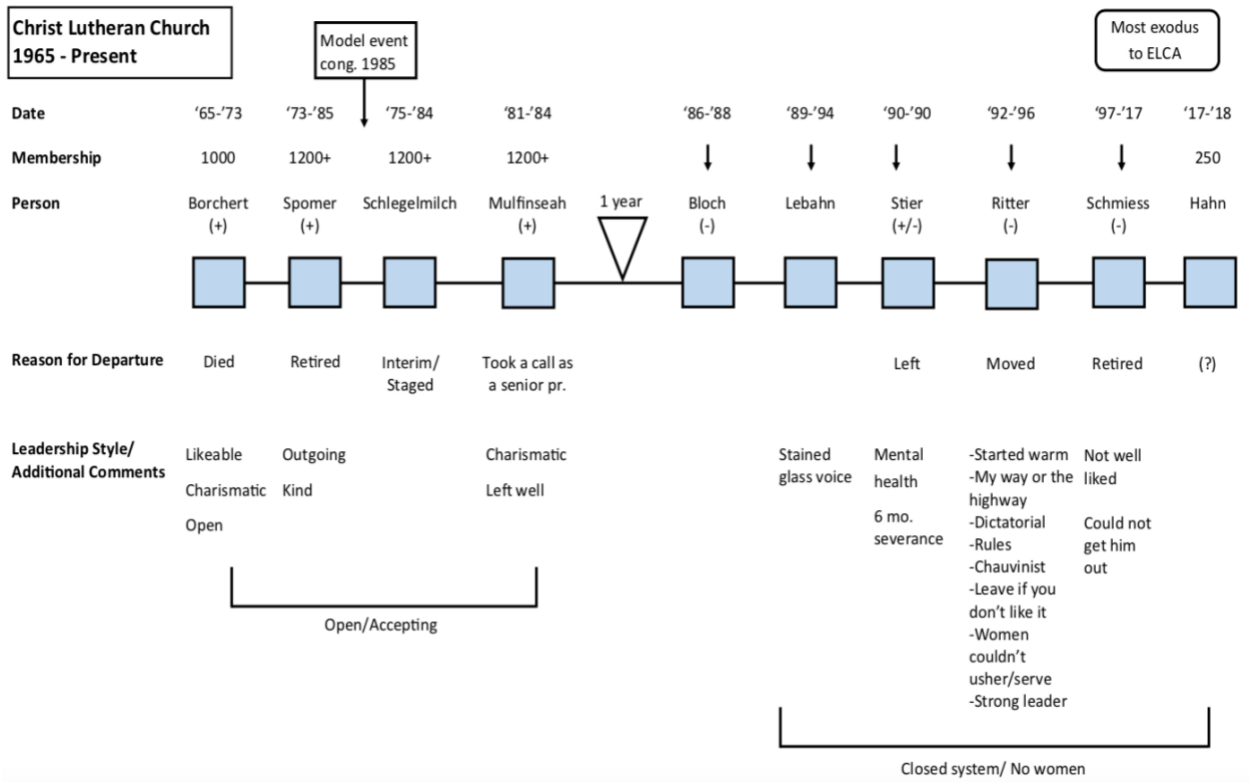
Nodal moments are those moments in the life of a person or a community which are life changing. In our nation, 9-11 is a nodal moment, as is the explosion of the Challenger, assassination of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., etc. These nodal moments have power and have defined generations. In families, things such as fire, divorce, moving, deaths, a landmark trip, etc. can be nodal moments.

Take some time to reflect on your nodal moments in your life personally, in your family, in your generation, and as an American. Personal nodal moments in the life of family could be: funerals, life-threatening illness, weddings, births, divorce, retirement, geographic relocation or terminating any significant relationship.

Community Genogram

The following example shows how genograms can also be used in a congregational system to provide insights into the system.

Taking time with your congregational leaders and exploring nodal moments in the life of your congregation can be a healthy experience.



References for this Session

- Brown, Brené, *Dare to Lead*, Random House, 2018.
- Friedman, Edwin, *Generation to Generation*, Guilford Press, 1985.
- Lynn, Adele, *Quick Emotional Intelligence Activities for Busy Managers*, American Management Association, 2007.
- Vermont Center for Family Studies, *Genogram.*