

“Let’s Talk About…” is a column in our monthly newsletter where we will learn one thing at a time about how we can love others the way they want to be loved. We will learn something each month that helps us understand and respect people who are different from us a little more deeply.

Wonderful, amazing Smoky Hill UMC people: This is my last month with you all. As excited as I am for the next step in my journey, I will miss you all greatly. I appreciate so many of you who have let me know these past few months just how much I will be missed, too.

Change, even good change, is hard. I am confident I will be very happy and learn loads of useful things in my chaplaincy residency. I am equally confident you all are up to incredible, miraculous things, and that whoever comes to you next will be exactly the person that’s needed to support what God is up to in this church. And, recognizing the opportunities in this change does not make it any easier! So this month, **let’s talk about change**. More specifically, let’s talk about what change does in a group of people.

Whenever someone enters or leaves a group, it changes all the group dynamics. I’m using my departure from Smoky Hill as an example, but this is not the only change that’s happened at our church recently! This church is vibrantly alive, and part of being alive is constant change. Some changes feel bigger to some people than others. All sorts of changes in leadership, as well as the loss of long-time active members of our congregation, raise questions and introduce uncertainty that was not there before. All of this naturally stirs up some anxiety, as it’d be called in family systems theory. I’m going to talk about Big Feelings instead of calling it anxiety because the way that ‘anxiety’ shows up in our relationships may not look like what we’d call anxiety at all. But it always involves Big Feelings—any variety of them: anger, sadness, fear, even happiness—somewhere within the group.

The simple fact of change naturally creates some anxiety around all the uncertainty, so it is up to those in the group to cope with the resulting Big Feelings in healthy or not-so-healthy ways. I think we’ve all experienced a variety of those less-healthy ways of handling Big Feelings. It can be tempting to blame someone for not only a decision, but all of our feelings about that decision. Sometimes we are drawn to gossip about a problem with anyone except someone who could actually do something about it. Some of us are prone to withdraw or disconnect, while others come ready for a fight anytime, anywhere. And there are other possibilities. Humans are impressively good at coming up with inventive ways to relate to each other poorly!

But rest assured, there are healthy ways we can get creative, too. As we are United Methodists, the first healthy way to manage anxiety I would offer to you is a generous helping of good ole’ Wesleyan grace. **Be gracious** with yourself and others. I know I don’t always recognize it immediately when I’m having Big Feelings about a change, and often before I know it, I’ve attributed those Big Feelings to something that, in other circumstances, might not matter to me at all! So make space to check in with yourself, to see if you can identify what those Big Feelings are actually about.

Second, **get curious**. Redirect those Big Feelings, if you’re having them, into a passion for learning. If you’re around others who seem to be dealing with Big Feelings even if you’re not, get curious about why the topic at hand matters so much to them and what life experiences are influencing their behavior or opinion in this moment. If you find yourself really resistant to some decision the church is making, get curious about that topic. Really get into the research and find data and perspectives that validate your experience, but also help you better understand why others are seeing this problem differently. (Bear in mind, validation means confirming “I’m not crazy for thinking this way,” not “I’m absolutely right and I told you so!” I speak as one who has definitely mis-used research for this purpose.)

Finally, if you are really committed to becoming a strong, reassuring presence for others whenever change comes up, look into family systems theory. I recommend The Non-Anxious Leader’s Podcast by Jack Shitama as an easy-to-understand resource that connects family systems directly to the life of the church, but there are loads of other good resources in this field too. And again, if that kind of research is not for you, go back to the first suggestion about grace. If we can consistently be truly gracious with one another, we can overcome all sorts of odds and be a beautiful beacon of hope for our community. Or, in the words you’ve all heard on Sunday morning, we can follow Jesus together to make the world a more loving and just place.

With great love,
Pastor Faryn

Our “Let’s Talk About…” column is one place where we can help one another learn how to be better allies for all our neighbors. If you have a question you’d like answered, or if there are things you wish others in our congregation better understood about your own marginalized identities or those for whom you are already a strong ally, please submit suggestions to <https://forms.gle/E9eRqZJGLgVagbDZ9> or email me directly at virginiag@smokyhillumc.org.