A Pastoral Theology of Congregational Care and Leadership: Nurturing Emergence

Carol P. Jeunnette

University of Denver

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/833
A PASTORAL THEOLOGY OF CONGREGATIONAL CARE AND LEADERSHIP:

NURTURING EMERGENCE

———

A Dissertation

Presented to
the Faculty of the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology Joint PhD Program

University of Denver

———

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

———

by

Carol P. Jeunnette

June 2010

Advisor: Larry Kent Graham, Ph.D.
©Copyright by Carol P. Jeunnette 2010

All Rights Reserved
Abstract

As with all bodies, congregational bodies experience challenges to their health, well-being, and ability to function as they desire. Problems in faith communities range from severe, intractable conflict to lethargy and decline, with far-ranging effects. The practice of offering pastoral care to individuals experiencing difficulties is rooted deeply in the Judeo-Christian tradition. There is, however, no explicit tradition of pastoral care for corporate congregational bodies experiencing difficulties. This dissertation draws on Bowen Family Systems Theory and its application by Edwin Friedman to congregations and leadership, in conjunction with aspects of process theology, to develop a pastoral theology of congregational care and leadership to guide care of suffering congregations.

The cornerstone concept of Bowen Family Systems Theory, differentiation of self (a capacity to maintain self in relationship), is brought together with Whitehead’s understanding of the teleology of the universe as maximizing beauty (the harmony of contrasts) to name differentiation as a process by which the Divine lures creation toward beauty and the emergence of new phenomena. A positive response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and emergence, or serendipitous surprise, is posited as a norm for the life of a Christian congregation. Care and leadership of congregations involve
nurturing movement toward beauty and emergence through the presence and being of a clergy caregiver/leader working on differentiation of self. This promotes the capacity of the congregation to be theotokos (God-bearer), embodying the presence of God’s differentiating, life-seeking, graceful, and creative relationship with the universe.

Pastoral theology begins with situations of human suffering and brings together cognate and theological resources to deepen understandings and shape care to respond to the suffering. Traditionally, academic pastoral theology addresses the difficulties of individuals and families, as well larger societal issues that contribute to difficulties. In conceptualizing a congregation as a whole in need of care, and attending to its healing and care from the perspective of pastoral theology, this work offers an extension of the discipline of pastoral theology into congregational care.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank my advisor, Larry Kent Graham, for his encouragement and assistance in the completion of this project. Over a number of years he has helped me transform intuitive connections between Bowen Theory, process thought, and a passion for congregations into a formal pastoral theology. I am grateful also to members of my dissertation committee, Dr. David Trickett and Dr. Gregory Robbins, and to the faculty of the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, in Washington D.C.

I also would like to acknowledge the contributions of the three study congregations, and members of the Voyagers who participated in the research for this project. I am deeply grateful to this clergy group in which I am always challenged to think about congregations in light of theory and theology. My thanks go to Larry Foster, a member of the Voyagers, for his curious, challenging, and consistent presence. Also, I am grateful to King of Glory Lutheran Church where I have served as interim pastor during the completion of this work. The congregation’s grace, support, and encouragement have been invaluable.

My deepest thanks go to my family, especially my spouse, John. It is only with their support that this dissertation has come to completion.

Finally, thanks to Rabbi Edwin Friedman, who started all of this. It can be done!
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

**CHAPTER 1. CARE AND LEADERSHIP OF CONGREGATIONS: INTRODUCTION**

- Statement of the Problem ................................. 1
- Thesis and Scope ........................................... 3
- Methodology .................................................. 9
  - Pastoral Theological Methodology ................. 10
  - Movements of a Pastoral Theological Methodology 12
  - Research Process ........................................ 16
  - Theoretical and Theological Resources .......... 24
- Contributions .................................................. 26
- Chapter Outline ............................................. 29

**CHAPTER 2. CONGREGATIONS, CARE, AND LEADERSHIP** ................................. 33

- Introduction .................................................. 33
- Three Congregations ....................................... 34
  - First Church ............................................... 34
  - Second Church ........................................... 36
  - Third Church ............................................. 40
  - Congregational Questions ............................... 41
- The Way One Thinks About... ........................... 42
- Congregations ................................................. 44
  - New Testament Images .................................. 46
  - Contemporary Challenges to the Church .......... 52
  - Importance and Gifts of Congregations .......... 57
  - Healthy Congregations ................................. 59
- Clergy ........................................................... 60
  - The Office of Pastor ..................................... 61
  - A Unique Role ............................................ 63
  - Contemporary Challenges .............................. 65
- Care and Leadership ....................................... 66
  - Care .......................................................... 67
  - Leadership .................................................. 72
A Process Vision of Reality ................................................................. 221
   Actual Entities: Prehensions and Concrescence ................................ 221
   Actual Entities: Subjective Aim ..................................................... 228
   Societies of Occasions and Humans ............................................... 233
A Process Vision of God ..................................................................... 239
   Panentheism .................................................................................. 240
   Beauty and Emergence .................................................................. 243
   Evil: Opposition to God’s Purpose ............................................... 248
   How Does God Respond? The Lure of the Divine ......................... 253
Congregations, Care, and Leadership through a Process Lens ............ 257

CHAPTER 6. NURTURING EMERGENCE: A PASTORAL THEOLOGICAL
      INTERPRETATION OF CONGREGATIONAL CARE AND LEADERSHIP .... 259
   Introduction .................................................................................... 259
   Theology and Theory: A Process of Concrescence ....................... 260
      Theological Proposition One ...................................................... 265
      Theological Proposition Two .................................................... 272
      Theological Proposition Three ................................................. 279
      Theological Proposition Four .................................................. 283
      Theological Proposition Five ................................................... 286
      Theological Proposition Six ..................................................... 290
   Emerging Definitions ..................................................................... 292
      A Healthy, Emerging Congregation .......................................... 292
      Pastoral Care and Leadership: Nurturing Emergence ............... 293
      Pastoral Care and Leadership of Congregations ....................... 298

CHAPTER 7. NURTURING EMERGENCE: A PASTORAL THEOLOGICAL
      ARTICULATION OF A “WAY OF BEING” IN CONGREGATIONAL CARE AND
      LEADERSHIP ............................................................................ 301
   For Clergy Leaders ......................................................................... 301
      What Do I Think? What Do I Believe? ...................................... 302
      Working on Self-in-System ....................................................... 304
      Research and Experiments ...................................................... 309
      Learning .................................................................................... 312
      Responding to the Lure Toward Beauty and Emergence ........... 314
   Congregational Care and Leadership: Promoting Differentiation .... 316
      Decreasing Anxiety .................................................................... 318
      Promoting Differentiation ....................................................... 325
      Third Church ............................................................................ 331
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shortcomings/Challenges</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Possibilities</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serendipitous Surprises!</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B</td>
<td>358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D</td>
<td>361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix H</td>
<td>383</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1. CARE AND LEADERSHIP OF CONGREGATIONS: INTRODUCTION

Now you are the Body of Christ and individually members of it.

1 Corinthians 12:27

Statement of the Problem

The apostle Paul’s organic metaphor of the church offers an image of a congregation as a living body of interdependent and interwoven parts in which mutual care overcomes divisions, builds unity, and equips the body to participate in Christ’s ongoing work in the world.¹ This image was an ideal the apostle held before the Christian congregation at Corinth as it was experiencing divisions and difficulties. Although written during the first century, this metaphor retains its meaning and relevance for many contemporary faith communities—congregational bodies that are too divided, too conflicted, or too weak to function as a sign of the continuing presence of Christ.

All ‘bodies’ whether individual or corporate, experience challenges to health, well-being, and their ability to function as they desire. Congregations are no exception. Problems in faith communities range from severe, intractable conflict to lethargy and

¹ Rom. 12, I Cor. 12, Eph. 4.
decline. When a congregational body suffers, the effects are significant and far-ranging. Members suffer from broken relationships. Worship can be difficult as focus shifts from the Divine to the difficulties, at times to the extent that the presence of God may be questioned. When pain, rejection, and discord override love of neighbor, the very function of the congregation is challenged. The body is less able to minister to its members or its community. Unable to discern a positive purpose for the congregation, members may be tempted to write off the church as a whole as having no reason for being. Congregations such as these are in need of help.

The practice of clergy and other designated caregivers offering pastoral care to individuals experiencing difficulties is rooted deeply in the Judeo-Christian tradition.\textsuperscript{2} There is, however, no explicit, corresponding tradition of clergy offering pastoral care to a corporate (congregational) body that is experiencing difficulties.\textsuperscript{3} The pastoral function of clergy in relationship to a congregation as a whole or body is generally described as leadership. Traditional understandings of leadership, however, do not address the need for care of congregational bodies that are suffering. Deeply troubled congregations are in need of pastoral care, traditionally described as follows:


\textsuperscript{3} Although it is difficult to confirm, the use of the plural form of “you” in the Greek New Testament texts suggests a more communal view of care in the earlier church. This perspective becomes visible when one reads through, for example, Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians with the assumption that the “you” addressed refers to the community as a whole, rather than individuals.
...helping acts, done by representative Christian persons, directed toward the healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling of troubled persons whose troubles arise in the context of ultimate meanings and concerns.\textsuperscript{4}

The purpose of this dissertation is to develop a pastoral theology of care and leadership of congregations. Pastoral theology, described by Seward Hiltner as an “operation-centered or function-centered branch of theology,” begins with a situation of suffering and need. It attends to theological questions raised by the practice of care in response to that need, and brings theological and cognate secular knowledge into conversation in order to shape care in response to the needs being addressed.\textsuperscript{5} The situation of human suffering and need to which this project responds is that of congregations experiencing severe difficulties in living as the ‘body of Christ’, as members define it. Drawing on Paul’s organic model, I view these congregational ‘bodies’ as not healthy and in need of care.

\textbf{Thesis and Scope}

The primary thesis of this dissertation is that pastoral care and leadership of congregations hold in common the purpose of nurturing emergence. A working definition of \textit{emergence} is “the appearance of new phenomena arising from the interactions of the community which are reflective of the ongoing composition of

\textsuperscript{4} Clebsch and Jaekle, \textit{Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective}, 4.

beauty.” Closely related is a secondary thesis, that the clergyperson’s presence and
being in relationship to the congregation as a body as well as to its individual members
provide a primary means of nurturing emergence. Both these rest on the foundational
assumption that it is possible to conceptualize and offer pastoral care to a congregation as
a whole.

The foundational assumption and secondary thesis draw heavily on a theory of
human behavior developed by Murray Bowen: Bowen Family Systems Theory
(hereafter, BFST). This natural systems theory allows conceptualization of a
congregation as a whole in a way that is congruent with the apostle Paul’s metaphor of
the congregation as the body of Christ. The cornerstone concept of BFST, differentiation
of self, is the basis on which it is possible to correlate pastoral care and leadership with
the nature of the clergyperson’s presence and being. Briefly, this complex concept
describes a way of maintaining self in relationship that positively influences the
functioning and maturity of a relationship system. It also can be defined as the ability to

---

6 Philosophical theologian Philip Clayton describes emergence as “the view that new and
unpredictable phenomena are naturally produced by interactions in nature; that these new structures,
organisms, and ideas are not reducible to the sub-systems on which they depend, and that the newly
evolved realities in turn exercise a causal influence on the parts out of which they arose.” Philip Clayton,
Biochemist and theologian Arthur Peacocke posits that the Divine works in and through a world of
emergent processes. Arthur Peacocke, "Articulating God's Presence in and to the World Unveiled by the
Sciences," in In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's
Presence in a Scientific World, ed. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK:
maintain one’s own thinking, feeling and choices on behavior in the midst of close relationships. Chapter 3 gives significant attention to differentiation of self.

The primary thesis of this dissertation, that pastoral care and leadership of congregations hold in common the purpose of nurturing emergence, draws on BFST as well as aspects of process and evolutionary theologies to posit a shift in the conceptualization of pastoral care and a close connection between care and leadership. The idea of emergence suggests that care and leadership offer the potential for moving beyond restoration of the past to something new, an idea captured by the concept of beauty in process theology and by the phenomenon of emergence in cosmology and evolutionary biology. Beauty, briefly described, is “a harmony of contrasts,” intensity, an ordering of novelty, and the “delicate balance of coherence and complexity, unity and diversity,” toward which the Divine lures creation. The relationship between differentiation of self and beauty is central to this project.

The location of a project focused on congregations in the academic field of pastoral theology is somewhat unusual and requires justification. Traditionally, the concern of the discipline of pastoral theology has been with troubled individuals and families, and more recently, with addressing societal issues that contribute to these

7 Murray Bowen, Family Therapy in Clinical Practice (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1978).
troubles. Although congregations often are the setting of care, and at times clergy and laypersons are caregivers, the congregation itself as a whole has not been addressed as the recipient of care.\(^9\) This dissertation focuses pastoral care on congregational bodies as wholes.

At first glance, the relatively new academic discipline of congregational studies would appear to be a more appropriate location for this project. Describing this new field as “a framework that loosely incorporates the interrogative methods of the social sciences for the description and clarification of congregational life,” scholars have produced numerous studies focusing on congregations. Although these works are helpful in understanding dynamics in congregations, as well as congregational culture, in general

---


One exception to the focus on care within congregations is the final chapter of Larry Kent Graham’s psychosystemic pastoral theology in which he describes work with a congregation that had experienced clergy sexual misconduct. See Larry Kent Graham, *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds: A Psychosystems Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992); ———, "Healing the Congregation: The Dynamics of a Congregation's Process of Recovery from Its Minister's Sexual Boundary Crossing with Parishioners," *Pastoral Psychology* 44 (1996)165-83.
they do not include theological perspectives. The focus to date is on sociology of congregations. This dissertation brings theology into the picture.

In addition to the academic work of congregational studies, a plethora of books can be described as ‘self-help’ or ‘how-to’ guides for congregations and clergy. These popular yet very helpful works often fail to identify underlying assumptions and theoretical approaches. They may use Scripture to support a practice or point of view, although deeper theological reflection generally is absent. Many of these books are helpful as entry points into thinking about a particular problem, and they offer assistance to clergy and congregational leaders looking for specific tools and techniques with which to address specific issues. However, few of them address theoretical or theological issues.

---


11 The recent work of Diana Butler Bass is somewhat different and bears noting. The deep knowledge of church history she brings to her contemporary research on congregations, in addition to her passion for the future of Protestant Christianity, has produced work that is accessible both to clergy and laypersons. Her books encourage theological conversation around the purpose and nature of the church. Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004); ———, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006).
at deeper levels. The genre includes a number of helpful and accessible volumes that draw on BFST to understand congregations.

The first application of BFST to clergy and congregations was the work of Rabbi Edwin Friedman, an early student of BFST who found that the theory made sense of much of what he had experienced in his congregations. *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, published in 1985, has become a standard way of understanding congregations. Although it offers the most thorough explanation of the theory in relationship to congregations and is used extensively in theological

---


education, it lacks academic rigor. However, Friedman’s work, especially in terms of leadership, is a primary resource in this project.

In neither the congregational studies nor the congregational self-help literature have I found resources that relate theological and theoretical perspectives to each other in order to guide care and leadership of troubled congregations. Approaches that draw on sociological and/or psychological resources lack adequate theological reflection. Similarly, theological approaches without attention to understandings of human behavior tend to be less practical in addressing the reality of congregational life. However, there is one scholar whose work provides support for this project. I believe that the pastoral theological method developed by Hiltner is well-suited despite its traditional focus on pastoral care of individuals and families.

**Methodology**

Congregational bodies, just as individual bodies, experience difficulties and challenges that can impair their ability to be in ministry and mission. Simply put, at times congregational bodies suffer and are in need of pastoral care that can assist them in the healing process. My project focuses on how best to promote congregational healing. In this dissertation I employ a methodology that draws on both a natural systems theory of human behavior and aspects of process theology.
Pastoral Theological Methodology

Pastoral theology offers a framework through which resources from theology and the social sciences are brought together to address the problem of suffering. Although the concept of pastoral theology has a long history, it is Seward Hiltner’s definition that is foundational for much of the contemporary Protestant discipline.\(^{15}\) According to Hiltner, pastoral theology is the “branch or field of theological knowledge and inquiry that brings the shepherding perspective to bear upon all the operations and functions of the church and the minister, and then draws conclusions of a theological order from reflection on these observations.”\(^{16}\) Several aspects of this definition continue to shape the field today.

First, pastoral theology is a formal branch of theology, as important as the more abstract branches such as Christology and soteriology. Second, pastoral theology is constructed from the perspective of shepherding—from an attitude of tender and solicitous concern for an individual or group. Third, pastoral theology is an operation-centered or function-centered endeavor in which the events involved in shepherding are both the focus of inquiry and the venue in which newly developed pastoral theological proposals are tested.

In developing his methodology, Hiltner distinguished his understanding of pastoral theology from others. First, he does not see the field as “merely the practice of


\(^{16}\) Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology.*, 20
anything.” Rather, “the practice or functions or events are examined reflectively and thus lead to theory.” Second, it “is not merely applied theology,” nor is it “just pastoral psychology or pastoral sociology under a new name.” Nor is pastoral theology “the theory of all the functions and operations of the pastor and the church,” as it has been understood throughout much of Christian history. As Hiltner defines it,

> Pastoral theology is an operation-focused branch of theology, which begins with theological questions and concludes with theological answers, in the interim examining all acts and operations of pastor and church to the degree that they are involved the perspective of Christian shepherding.  

Although the metaphor of pastor as shepherd may be used in relationship to all functions of the church, the particular aspect of caring for suffering congregational bodies is central to this application of Hiltner’s understanding of pastoral theology.

In the decades since Hiltner’s work, the foci and resources used in developing pastoral theology have expanded. In light of greater recognition of ways in which unjust social structures contribute to suffering, the emphasis on personal care and healing grounded in an understanding of suffering as emanating from the individual’s psyche has been expanded to identify and address the impacts of sexism, racism, violence, and other oppressive realities. Increasingly, pastoral theologians have turned their attention to the wider society. Pastoral theologian Larry Kent Graham has called for the field of pastoral theology to “go public,” that is, to engage in public theology in which the view of the “clinic” is broadened to include all aspects of health, all providers of health care, and to

---

17 Ibid., 22-24
work toward justice, access to resources, and well-being for all of creation. By “clinic” Graham means all “organized and institutionalized efforts within a culture to prevent and repair human brokenness.” In this dissertation I engage Hiltner’s understanding of pastoral theology; I also heed Graham’s call and broaden his definition of clinic to include congregations.

Movements of a Pastoral Theological Methodology

The structure of this dissertation is based on Graham’s description of pastoral theological methodology, which

…begins with an examination of concrete acts of care. It identifies and evaluates the symbols, values, context, meaning systems, actions, and outcomes of care in the light of theological and/or ethical questions arising from these concrete processes of pastoral caregiving. It then returns to the religious tradition for critical engagement and critique. Finally, it ventures constructive theological and ethical reinterpretations and suggests revised strategies for the organization and practice of care.19

This methodology is organized into five movements. The first movement is comprised of descriptions of specific acts of pastoral caretaking. In the second movement, these acts of pastoral caretaking are considered in light of a secular theory of human behavior. The acts are considered again in the third movement in light of aspects of the religious tradition. The first three movements are generative of the final two, in

---


19 Graham, "Pastoral Theology as Public Theology." 12-13
which new theological understandings are constructed, and strategies to guide care are
developed.

As its first movement, this dissertation begins with the reality of troubled
congregations and specific acts of pastoral caretaking. I have gathered data on
experiences of suffering congregations and acts of caretaking and leadership from three
sources: first, from two troubled congregations with which I have worked extensively as
interim pastor and consultant; second, from research on a congregation that experienced
significant difficulties but now is functioning well; and third, from clergy who have
worked extensively with BFST in their congregations.

The second movement of the methodology employed in this dissertation looks at
the specific acts of pastoral caretaking through a particular theory of human behavior—
Bowen Family Systems Theory.\textsuperscript{20} I first describe concepts of BFST important to this
project and then employ these concepts to conceptualize a congregation as a body and to
deepen understandings of humans and relationship systems. Variables of differentiation
of self and chronic anxiety receive specific attention, as do Friedman’s applications of

\textsuperscript{20} Broadly speaking, psychodynamic theories of human behavior understand internal
psychological conflicts as the cause of difficulties. Help involves assisting the sufferer to gain insight into
these conflicts. Thus from the perspective of cognitive-behaviorist theories, help focuses on changing
problematic behavioral and/or thought patterns. Insight is not necessary. In contrast to behaviorist theory,
narrative theories seek to help people rewrite unhelpful “stories” in their lives. Cultural theories identify
many of the “isms” in society, e.g., racism, sexism, ageism, and other oppressive societal phenomena, as
the primary underlying factor in difficulties. Help from this perspective involves assisting individuals to
identify ways in which they are determined and oppressed by societal factors, and to resist and refute those
factors in their own lives. In this dissertation I will follow a natural systems approach.
BFST to congregations and clergy, and his understanding of “differentiation as leadership,” and of “leadership as a healing modality.”

The third methodological movement brings aspects of the religious tradition into the conversation. Concepts of process theology support this project. The process thought of Alfred North Whitehead, especially as introduced by John Cobb and David Griffin, offers a relational view of the world that is congruent with BFST. This work is extended by the concept of emergence, directly related to the understanding of the evolutionary nature of the universe and humanity. Each of the major resources used in this work—situations of suffering congregations and care of them, Bowen Family Systems Theory, and concepts of process theology—is discussed in greater detail in the following section.

The first three methodological movements of pastoral theology generate the final two. In movement four the process climaxes with the construction of new understandings of humans and new theological meanings. I suggest the following theological propositions:

1. As the body of Christ, a Christian congregation is called to respond to the Divine’s lure toward beauty, to which change and challenge are inherent.

2. The capacity for creative responses to challenge and change is diminished by anxious reactivity that spreads through a congregation.

---

3. Differentiation is a process by which the Divine lures creation toward beauty, promotes healing, and nurtures the emergence of new phenomenon.

4. The human capacity to increase differentiation promotes the ability to recognize and respond to God’s lure toward beauty (the harmony of contrasts).

5. Central to care and leadership of congregations is the presence and being of a clergy leader who, in working on differentiation of self, responds to the lure of the Divine toward beauty. Thus, the clergy leader nurtures healing and emergence in the congregation.

6. The presence and being of a congregational body working on differentiation responds to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and nurtures healing and emergence in its members and its community.

Deeply rooted in these newly constructed understandings and meanings, the final movement returns to the particularity of congregations and clergy. A description of a highly functional or healthy, emerging congregation suggests how these new ideas work out in practice. I revisit the situations of congregational suffering presented in the first movement in light of the newly-constructed theological propositions. I offer practical help, not as a technique or how-to guide, but as a set of questions developed to assist clergy to develop their own thinking about self in system as they care for and lead
congregations. Differentiation of self is central, as is a recognition and response to the Divine’s lure toward beauty and emergence.

Research Process

I gathered data about First Church during a period of consultation with the congregation. The congregational board and each group with which I met gave permission to gather data and use it in a future dissertation. I gathered data about Second Church during the fifteen months I spent as their interim pastor. Although it was a less formal process that extended over a period of time, permission to include the congregation in research for my dissertation was given by the congregation board at the beginning of my tenure. The congregation as a whole was also informed of this research project. Study of both these congregations took place prior to development and submission of my dissertation proposal, and my application to the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB). (See Appendix A.) With the exception of an additional survey, the procedures followed in data gathering and use of the data are consistent with requirements of the IRB and similar to the protocols described in the application that was approved by the board.

The application to the IRB covered research with Third Church, as well as with the group of clergy described above. Copies of Informed Consent and the “Questionnaire for Clergy Group Participants” are in Appendix B.
Data Gathering

There were variations in the way in which data were gathered in each of the congregations. The research conducted at both First Church and Second Church was in conjunction with a helping process. The research with Third Church was conducted through an in-depth interview with the pastor.

At First Church, I contracted to work as a consultant with the interim pastor in the development and implementation of an intervention-type process designed to promote healing and assist the congregation to turn toward the future. All data collected at First Church and considered in this project was gathered in order to assist the congregation in its process of understanding and healing. Decisions about what data are helpful were based on the following assumptions based on BFST: (1) that it is possible to identify emotional processes that promote or diminish the ability of congregations to function, (2) that understanding of these emotional processes contributes to the capacity to think more factually and objectively about difficulties, and (3) that “increasing factual information about one’s family [congregation] is an important component of becoming more of a self.”22 These assumptions are considered in depth in Chapter 3.

Based on these assumptions, data were collected as follows: information about the presenting problem as well as perceptions of challenges and functioning of the congregation over the years was gathered through a series of twelve meetings over a

---

22 Kerr and Bowen, Family Evaluation, 286.
period of two and one-half weeks. One hundred and twenty members of the
congregation participated in these meetings, which the interim pastor and I facilitated
together. A qualitative interview design was used for these meetings. A set of questions
guided the meetings, although they were not followed strictly. The questions are in
Appendix C.

Data also were collected through intensive study of the history of First Church.
Annual Reports for approximately thirty years of the congregation’s history were
collected and studied. Information gathered from these reports included membership,
worship attendance, clergy and staff members, finances, challenges and joys. Some data
that were missing from reports, or missing because the Annual Reports themselves were
missing, was gathered from the Annual Reports of the larger denominational body. This
information allowed me to identify other challenging times in the life of the congregation
and to develop hypotheses regarding its overall health.

At Second Church, I was hired as the interim pastor following the resignation of
their called pastor.23 Because the congregation, at least at first glance, appeared to be
functioning well, my work there was not interventionist in nature. However, as interim
pastor, I was to assist them in moving into the future. I took the opportunity of serving at

---

23 In this work, a called pastor is understood as one selected by the congregation as the
culmination of a pastoral search process and called to be a long-term clergy leader of the congregation. An
interim pastor is understood as one who serves the congregation for a limited period of time, during a
pastoral vacancy and congregational call process, and/or as an intentional interim who brings specific skills
to troubled congregations.
Second Church to do two things: first, to observe and study a congregational system closely through the lens of BFST; and second, to work on my own differentiation of self.

During my time at Second Church I was testing Bowen theory, first to determine the extent to which to its concepts are helpful in understanding the functioning of a congregation, and second, to assess the validity of Friedman’s understanding of differentiation as leadership. This testing required studying the congregation as a system, as well as careful observation of myself within the system. There were both formal and informal aspects to the research.

The formal research was carried out in conjunction with the congregation’s preparations to call a new pastor. This included the administration of a “Perceptions of Healthy Congregations” survey, which was available at worship for several weeks.²⁴ (See Appendix D.) Fifty-eight members completed and returned this confidential survey. The responses were compiled and presented to the congregation during a special congregational meeting. The second component of formal research was similar to that done at First Church—an in depth study of the congregation’s history, done with the assistance of the Call Committee.

²⁴ This survey was developed in conjunction with a study. In addition to its use in the original study, it has been used in four congregations. Carol Jeunnette, "Perceptions of Healthy Congregations" (University of New Mexico, 2000).
Much of the research at Second Church was less formal, participant observation.\textsuperscript{25} During my time there I paid attention to relationships and activities, asked questions, and was generally curious about the congregation, its history, its vision, and its functioning. Based on observation as well as several challenging events, I developed and tested a hypothesis that the congregation was afraid of change and difference.

Research into the validity of the BFST hypothesis (that the presence of a leader working on differentiation of self will help the congregation to function better) required careful observation of my own functioning, the impact of the congregation on my anxiety, reactivity, and ability to be thoughtful, as well as careful observation of the impact of my functioning on the congregation. Granted, this is subjective research. Given that I was new to the congregation, I was the only one aware of differences in my functioning. Likewise, given that I was new to the congregation, I could not be certain that there were shifts in the functioning of individuals with whom I worked, or the system as a whole. I recorded perceptions, but they cannot be proven as factual.

Research of Third Church was somewhat different. I considered it important that the portraits of First and Second Churches be balanced with a portrait of a healthy congregation. A judicatory official recommended Third Church to me for study, in particular because this congregation had experienced significant conflict and distress, and is now functioning well. In contrast to research with the other two congregations, data

for Third Church was gathered solely through an in-depth interview with the pastor. The original protocol indicated that research with this congregation would include interviews of several congregation members as well as study of the history of the congregation through historical documents. Because in my initial contact with the pastor there was some resistance to requests to interview others in the congregation, and to the request to access historical documents, I decided to proceed with his interview and revisit the other requests during that time. At the close of the three-hour interview of this pastor, the topic of additional interviews and study of historical documents was raised again. In light of information gathered in the interview, and in direct discussion of these questions, the following decisions were made: first, because of the significant potential of interviews with congregational members to cause distress and open wounds that may not have been healed completely, and because of the potential that interviews of several individuals would cause a ripple effect of pain into the larger congregation, I did not pursue additional interviews as outlined in the study protocol. Second, because the purpose for inclusion of this congregation in the study is to describe a congregation that has worked toward greater health and is now described as healthy, and because of concern that the process of my accessing and studying historical documents had the potential to disrupt the congregation and cause some distress—especially among staff members—and because I determined that an historical study of this congregation would contribute little
to the overall, I chose not to pursue historical study. Information gathered in the interview with the pastor has proved sufficient.

In addition to the three congregations, data for this project was gathered from clergy who have had extensive experience with BFST and, in particular, its application by Rabbi Edwin Friedman to congregations and leadership. This data comes from two sources: a questionnaire sent to the Voyagers, a group of clergy that has been studying BFST and Friedman’s work for over a decade; and less formal reports from participants in clergy seminars on leadership and family systems theory. I have served as leader and co-leader of these seminars. The insights of those who observe congregations through the systems lens of Bowen and Friedman, and who perceive their work on differentiation of self as significant to their ministry, have been an important resource for this project.

Research with the clergy group was conducted by survey. Letters of invitation to participate in the study, the survey, and Informed Consent forms were mailed to fifteen members of the Voyagers. Six surveys with the signed consent forms were returned. In total, this group of six has 110 years of study and experience with BFST and Friedman’s work.

Data Analysis and Use

In the introduction to his speculative philosophy, process philosopher A. N. Whitehead offers a metaphor for the method of discovery in metaphysics:
The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation… The success of the imaginative experiment is always to be tested by the applicability of its results beyond the restricted locus from which it originated.²⁶

This project is an effort to develop a pastoral theology of congregational care and leadership. It begins on the ground, in the reality of congregations that are in distress. It flies high, looking broadly at ways in which congregations as emotional systems function, and ways to understand the reality of God in a relational and processive world. It develops hypotheses and returns to the ground of reality to test these hypotheses.

The data collected in this project are the “ground of particular observation.”²⁷ Congregational data serve primarily to illustrate the reality of suffering faith communities. Further, the congregational descriptions elucidate systemic concepts of Bowen’s view of reality. Finally, the congregations serve as the landing place for the constructed theological interpretations, offering a context in which these interpretations can be tested.

Data gathered from the clergy group also provide illustrations and offer a greater breadth of experience to the project. These data are not presented in one section but are scattered throughout the project as is appropriate and helpful.

²⁷ Ibid., 5.
Theoretical and Theological Resources

The purpose of this dissertation is not to prove the validity of BFST. Nor is it to develop criteria by which to judge the relative health or unhealth of a congregation. Its purpose, rather, is to construct theological theory that can guide care and leadership for troubled congregations. Any theological construction necessarily is creative and speculative.

Although pastoral theology begins with concrete human situations, it draws on other resources as well. The choices of BFST and aspects of process theology are intentional and related to one another. At one level, the choice of BFST is related to the theory’s shift in focus from the individual to the family or relationship system—a shift that easily allows the conceptualization of a congregation as a deeply inter-related whole. Although humans generally consider ourselves to be autonomous individuals, BFST posits that it is impossible to understand the thinking, feeling, and behavior of an individual outside of the context of the multigenerational family of which he or she is a part. Humans are so deeply embedded in emotional systems that relatively little of our behavior is self-driven. Simply stated, the emotional system has greater influence on an individual than an individual has on the larger system. In my view, while not family systems, congregations are relationship systems also governed by emotional processes.28

---

28 The terms “emotional system” and “emotional process” are central to understanding BFST. They are explained further in Chapter 3.
Thus I apply the understanding of symptoms, symptom development, and help presented in BFST to congregations.

Two commitments guide my choice of theological perspectives for this project. First is my basic theological conviction—that whatever that which I call “God” may be, God is on the side of life. Ecological theologian, Sallie McFague states this idea beautifully:

I begin with the assumption that what we can say with an assurance about the character of Christian faith is very little and that even that will be highly contested. Christian faith is, it seems to me, most basically a claim that the universe is neither indifferent nor malevolent but that there is a power (and a personal power at that) which is on the side of life and its fulfillment.\(^{29}\)

The exploration of meaning for the assertion “God is on the side of life” is, in my opinion, the central work of theology. This exploration gives direction to the work of this dissertation.

The second commitment guiding the choice of theological perspectives relates to the view of the universe and life presented through BFST. Two specific aspects of BFST are particularly important. First is the theory’s deeply relational understanding of humans. A theological perspective for this project must hold an anthropology in which the relational nature of humans is fundamental. The second important aspect of BFST is the theory’s commitment to developing a science of human behavior that might one day

be accepted by other natural sciences.\textsuperscript{30} The BFST assumptions that humans are products of a continuing evolution, and that differentiation appears to be strongly related to the increasing complexity of evolution, call for engagement with a theological perspective committed to understanding God in relationship to a continually evolving creation. These considerations led to me to choose a process theological perspective for this dissertation.

**Contributions**

Although many congregations are in need of assistance to restore their ability to function as the body of Christ, limited guidance is available. As a pastoral theologian, I anticipate four groups for whom this work will be helpful: (1) pastoral theologians and the discipline of pastoral theology; (2) individuals preparing to serve congregations; (3) clergy currently serving congregations; and (4) judicatory officials with responsibility for clergy and congregations.

I see this project as a significant contribution to the discipline of pastoral theology. Insofar as the discipline seeks to draw together theology with the best theories of human behavior and functioning, to do so in conjunction with care for congregational

\textsuperscript{30} This expectation raises the question of whether psychological theories are scientific. Fairly early in his psychiatric training in Freudian theory at the Menninger Institute, Bowen began developing a theory of human behavior that started with the assumption that humans, as products of evolution, are more like other animals than different from them. Although deeply respectful of much of Freud’s work, Bowen found much of psychoanalytic theory too subjective to be taken seriously as a science. His ensuing research was grounded in extensive study of many natural sciences, especially biology and evolution.
bodies is a natural extension of its work. Given the centrality of ultimate meanings and concerns to the very existence of a congregation, attention to theologically informed care for these faith communities has ramifications far beyond individuals, helping to build congregations that are better able to contribute to lives of their members and families, and to life in the broader community. Similarly, attention to the life of the communal congregational body offers yet another perspective from which to do theology.

The addition of a theologically informed concept of pastoral care for congregations as wholes to the traditional pastoral care curriculum would be invaluable to theological students preparing for parish ministry. In their research on pastors in transition, Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger identify seven organizational and interpersonal reasons for clergy leaving parish ministry. The first is that seminaries do not prepare ministers for the practical aspects of ministry. As one of the respondents, a man who left ministry at the age of forty-two, wrote:

You go through seminary, and one of the beefs I have with the whole education process for clergy, I mean they spent all this time preparing you theologically around how to be a pastor. But they spent hardly any time around things like the practical issues of ministry: how do you deal with councils; how do you deal with difficult people—alligators in the congregation…?\(^{31}\)

While pastoral care of individuals is indeed one of the practical aspects of ministry, care and leadership of a congregation as a whole also is crucial. This dissertation seeks to address this need.

This project also contributes to the work of clergy currently serving congregations and the work of judicatory officials. Although Friedman’s book *Generation to Generation* is part of the pastoral care curriculum in many institutions, it is an introduction to BFST and its application to congregations. There is greater focus on the pastoral care of individuals and families, and on the pastor himself or herself, and somewhat less focus on the congregation as a whole. This project offers an in-depth application of BFST to congregations.

Finally, this dissertation initiates a conversation between BFST and process theology. Although Friedman identified some commonalities between the two, his work was an initial foray into the topic. In exploring correlations between the two, this project illustrates concepts of process theology in the concrete realities of congregational and human life as seen through the lens of BFST and considers concepts of the Bowen/Friedman axis, in light of a world in relationship with God who is on the side of life.

Recently, American religion scholar Diana Butler Bass wrote: “We know that everything is changing, that some sort of new world is coming. Everywhere. And we have no idea what it is becoming.”

All congregations face rapid changes, and an inability to respond creatively increases the potential for significant difficulties. A clergy leader’s perception of wider systemic processes is helpful in lessening reactivity and anxiety in the midst of difficulties. This broader perspective can enhance clarity of

---

vision, self-definition, and commitment to remain in relationships even when they are
difficult—all aspects of the process of differentiation. In these ways clergy can promote
healthier functioning of a congregational body. A congregation with clear vision, an
ability to celebrate differences while staying connected, and an adventurous desire to respond to the Divine lure, not only points to the presence of the Divine in its context, but participates in the creative emergence of beauty. My hope is that this work is part of the ongoing emergence of beauty.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation proceeds as follows. The current chapter has offered an introduction to the project that includes a description of the problem of suffering congregations and the need for theory to guide care and leadership. It also has introduced the pastoral theological methodology employed in this project as well as the primary sources. Finally, in this chapter I have noted contributions of the project.

Chapter 2 establishes the ground work for this project. It begins with descriptions of the congregations studied and theological questions raised in the context of that study and then turns attention to congregations in general. An overview of the contemporary context of North American, Protestant, liberal congregations is given, and several New Testament images are described, including Paul’s metaphor of the church as the body of Christ. The idea of a congregation as theotokos (bearer of God) is introduced and a
working definition of congregation is offered. The chapter concludes with a review of traditional understandings of pastoral care and leadership and development of working definitions of care and leadership.

Chapter 3 introduces the Bowen/Friedman axis. I discuss the theoretical orientation of the project with particular attention to the BFST concepts that are central to this dissertation. Consistent with Bowen’s original theoretical work, the focus here is on families as the emotional systems that shape individuals. A description of therapy, that is help and care from the perspective of the Bowen/Friedman axis, concludes the chapter.

In Chapter 4, the Bowen/Friedman axis is used as a tool to understand congregations. Following a discussion of congregations as emotional systems, I apply the concepts presented in Chapter 3 to congregations.33 The nature of the intersecting emotional systems of a congregation, and the position of a clergy person in those systems are reviewed. A proposal for basic guidelines for an assessment of congregational functioning is offered, and the chapter concludes with further development of Friedman’s ideas of differentiation of self as leadership, and leadership as a healing modality.34

Process thought and theology are the foci of Chapter 5. The first section includes an introduction to Whitehead’s philosophy and the radical shift in perspective presented in his metaphysics. I discuss his process vision of reality with attention to his

33 Friedman, Generation to Generation.

34 Ibid; Edwin H. Friedman, Reinventing Leadership (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1995); Friedman, Failure of Nerve.
understandings of God and God’s purpose, evil, and humanity, and process concepts of *beauty* and *emergence*. The chapter concludes by looking at congregations through the lens of process theology. Here I draw on the work of a number of additional process scholars.35  

Chapter 6 brings the process concepts of *conjunctions*, *disjunctions*, and *concrescences* into interaction with the Bowen/Friedman axis. In light of this discussion, the remainder of the chapter offers a theological interpretation of congregational care and leadership described as *nurturing emergence*. I propose and develop six theological propositions that draw on the interaction of the Bowen/Friedman axis and process theology in light of the need for care and leadership of troubled congregations.

In the final chapter, the newly developed pastoral theological interpretation of congregational care and leadership as nurturing emergence is brought back into conversation with data from the study congregations and the clergy research. In light of care and leadership as nurturing emergence, I present a series of questions to assist clergy to think about the congregation and themselves in the midst of the congregational system. I return to consider care and leadership of the study congregations in light of the


31
theological propositions presented in Chapter 5. The chapter and dissertation conclude with a discussion of the potential applicability of this pastoral theology to other congregational difficulties and challenges and to pastoral care in general.
CHAPTER 2. CONGREGATIONS, CARE, AND LEADERSHIP

Introduction

As a subsystem of theology in general, the task of pastoral theology “is to develop theory and practice for the ministry of care.”¹ Grounded in the reality of various situations of human suffering, pastoral theology draws on resources from faith traditions as well as secular knowledge to develop theory to guide care. Several tasks are necessary in the beginning stages of this project. The first task is to describe situations of congregational suffering representative of the needs to which this project responds. This chapter begins with stories of the three study congregations and articulates theological questions raised by their situations. The second task of this chapter is to identify and clarify basic theological assumptions. The remaining tasks are to clarify assumptions and understandings of the central foci of this work: congregations, clergy, pastoral care, and pastoral leadership. Sections three and four of this chapter develop working definitions of congregations and clergy. Section five offers working definitions of pastoral care and pastoral leadership.

¹ Graham, Care of Persons, Care of Worlds, 23.
Three Congregations

As discussed in Chapter 1, there are troubled congregations in need of pastoral care. Here I introduce three congregations. The first two are experiencing difficulties. The third congregation is one that has gone through turbulent times, but is functioning well at this time. Following this introduction, I consider theological questions raised by their suffering.

First Church

First Church was in distress. Over a period of two years, seven of nine staff members had resigned, leaving only the organist and preschool director in place. Those who had left included an associate pastor, who had been there a little over a year, the lay ministry coordinator, who had been in place for a number of years, the accompanist, and finally, the senior pastor. In addition to the departure of staff members, at least a dozen active families had transferred to other congregations. Attendance had declined significantly, as had financial support. Programs were being discontinued due to lack of both leadership and participation. Worship continued under the leadership of strong interim pastors but, as study participants described it, the partially empty pews, somewhat listless singing, and small handful of youngsters heading up for the children’s sermon were disheartening and frightening. Participants spoke of their fear of what the future might hold. Would this faith community survive?
A congregation of a mainline Protestant denomination, First Church is located in a suburb of a medium-sized city. Organized and chartered in the 1950s in a new neighborhood, it grew quickly. By the early 1960s the second building was completed, and there were approximately 700 members. Membership peaked in 1981 at over 1800. By the mid-1990s membership had declined to just over 1000, and average worship attendance was just over 300. Membership and worship attendance remained consistent until the period of conflict and resignation, when worship attendance declined again by about one-third.\(^2\)

In my consultation with this congregation, I discerned three clusters of opinions about the cause of the problems among the participants. In one cluster, the focus was on the pastor who had been there for a little over two years. More gracious members of this group perceived the problem as “a poor match between pastor and congregation.” The perception of less gracious individuals was that the pastor lacked the skills necessary to lead a congregation of this size.

A second cluster of opinions identified the congregation as the problem, citing a history of significant conflicts with clergy and frequent turnover of pastoral leaders. Some within this group reported their perception that specific members of the congregation had “gone after the pastor.” Others reported wondering, “What is wrong

\(^2\) Membership and attendance data was gathered from congregational annual reports, as well as from information submitted over the years to the wider denomination of which First Church is a part. In order to maintain confidentiality, the congregation is not named.
with us? How can we behave so badly?” A few individuals believed the roots of the congregation’s problems reached far back into its history, possibly in an unacknowledged and unresolved incident of clergy sexual misconduct. In their opinion, the long-term ramifications of this unresolved issue had created an ongoing distrust of clergy and unhealthy relational patterns.

The third cluster of opinions was observed among a number of people who walked into worship one morning only to find that their pastor had resigned, and everyone and everything was in turmoil. They reported being surprised and shocked. They had been unaware that the problems were severe enough to lead to the pastor’s departure.

First Church was suffering. Relationships were ruptured. The focus on the problems overshadowed almost everything else going on in the congregation. Lay leaders were in conflict with one another, as well as with the judicatory that some perceived as “unhelpful.” Current ministries were weakened, and in light of the situation, strategizing for future ministries did not seem viable. The focus was on survival of the organism.

Second Church

Second Church is one of several congregations birthed in a newly developing suburb during the late 1950s by a larger sister congregation. The first pastor arrived in
1958. The congregation was organized a year later with fifty members and the beginnings
of a first building. As the middle-class, primarily Anglo neighborhood grew, so did the
congregation. As the neighborhood aged, so did the congregation. Membership and
worship attendance fluctuated over the years. The highest average worship attendance of
384 was reported in the mid-1980s. By the late 1990s, it was reported to be 211. At the
time of this study, average worship attendance was 100.3

When I began as the interim pastor of Second Church, I was told by leaders that
the congregation had experienced significant difficulties five to six years earlier, but they
had worked through them and now were doing well. These difficulties had included a
very short and conflicted pastoral tenure and a blessing ceremony for a same-sex couple
in the congregation. During my first month there, the assessment that Second Church
was doing well seemed accurate. They appeared to be calm and fairly healthy.

During the second and third months of ministry at Second Church, several
somewhat disturbing events, and several additional pieces of information led me to
question my initial assessment. These included:

• The resignation in mid-August of all but one of the Sunday School teachers and
  leaders. Reported reasons for the resignations included burnout and
dissatisfaction with the curriculum used the previous year.

3 Membership and attendance data was gathered from congregational annual reports, as well as
from information submitted over the years to the wider denomination of which Second Church is a part. In
order to maintain confidentiality, the congregation is not named.
• Recognition that the issues around homosexuality were not settled. Several members voiced quiet, yet continuing reservations about the blessing and acceptance of the same-sex couple; some of these members also chose not to receive communion when either of the partners served.

• The inactivity of two men who had been in significant leadership roles for many, many years. These men indicated conflict with a former pastor and several others in leadership as reasons for their withdrawal from the life of the congregation.

• The sharing of the council presidency and vice-presidency by the same two individuals for the past eight years.

• Frequent turnover of clerical staff, reportedly related to conflict. I learned that the current office administrator took full responsibility for the work of the office several months before my arrival, upon the abrupt resignation of the former administrator the week before Holy Week.

During the first months of my ministry at Second Church I also learned that the average worship attendance and congregational membership had decreased by almost one-half during the difficulties in the congregation five years earlier. This conflict was described by some church members as a poor match between pastor and congregation combined with fallout in response to the blessing ceremony for the same-sex couple—a service that was held in the sanctuary without the approval of the church board and was presided over by a pastor from outside the congregation. Among other things I learned
that since the time of the conflict, members who left had not been contacted, that the committee structure had dissipated, and that board members lacked understanding of their position as leaders of the congregation.

The emergence of the above issues and information suggested that Second Church was not as healthy and functional as members had reported, or as I had thought during my early weeks. There was not, however, overt conflict in the congregation. There were no public disagreements, nor was there any obvious polarization. Face to face, everyone was quite cordial. However, a few members attempted to recruit me to their position. The fact that I was unable to discern what their position was or why they were attempting to convince me of it suggested an undercurrent of tension and possibly conflict.

After several months in the congregation, I developed a hypothesis: Second Church was an anxious congregation, but the anxiety was not expressed in conflict. Rather, it was expressed in their lethargy. Due to the loss of about half of their membership during the previous conflict, my guess was that any differences that might lead to conflict were being ignored. It appeared the congregation, quite unconsciously, had discerned that because conflict would threaten their survival, it could not be allowed. Because of that, the congregation was stuck. It was unable to do anything different. It was lethargic.

Change produces differences. Differences can lead to conflict. The only way to avoid conflict completely is to refuse to acknowledge differences, and thus, to preclude
any efforts to change. Unfortunately, congregations that are unable to change in response to the changes in their context have little possibility of long-term survival.\textsuperscript{4} While at first glance Second Church appeared healthy, a deeper look suggested that its fear of dealing with differences helped to avoid conflict, but ultimately it produced lethargy.

**Third Church**

The situation of the final congregation in this study is somewhat different. I selected Third Church for this study as an example of a congregation that is functioning well, i.e., a healthy congregation. Upon request, a judicatory official recommended it to me as an example of a faith community that had experienced significant problems in the past, worked intentionally toward health, and now is a vital congregation. Data on this congregation were gathered through an extensive interview with the current pastor, who was called to serve First Church in the midst of its problems, specifically because of his skill in working with congregations in turmoil. Because the nature of the congregational problem included clergy sexual misconduct, he carries the designation after pastor. He has served Third Church for over 15 years.\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{4} Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*.

As a healthy congregation, Third Church receives greater attention in the final chapter of the dissertation. In this chapter, however, suffice it to say that at one time Third Church was highly conflicted and divided. Subsequent to receiving allegations of malfeasance against Third Church’s highly popular pastor, the judicatory requested his resignation. The pastor read a letter of resignation during worship on the day before Christmas Eve. Concern about legal ramifications precluded sharing information about the allegations and the reasons for his resignation with the congregation. Thus, in addition to polarization over whether or not the pastor should have been forced to resign, (even though few people knew why he was forced to do so) there was a great deal of anger about the way in which the judicatory handled the situation. 

Third Church now is a vital, growing congregation that has made significant and creative efforts to serve its community. Further descriptions of the congregation, as well as the current pastor’s efforts to restore trust in clergy and promote the health of the congregation are in the final chapter.

Congregational Questions

Seward Hiltner suggests that pastoral theology “begins with theological questions and concludes with theological answers.”6 I have adopted his approach in this project. The situations of these study congregations raise the following questions:

---

6 Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology*. 

41
• What is a congregation?
• What is a “healthy” congregation?
• How is an “unhealthy” congregation to be understood?
• What causes “health” or “unhealth”?
• What is the role of a clergyperson in a congregation?
• What is pastoral care for a troubled congregation?
• What is pastoral leadership for a troubled congregation?

These questions, at times implicitly and at times explicitly, guide the work of this dissertation. They are considered from the perspective of BFST, from the perspective of process theology, and finally, in light of both together.

**The Way One Thinks About…**

In this postmodern era, the spectrum of possibilities for thinking about a phenomenon requires clarification of one’s particular approach—whether psychological, theological, or sociological. An articulation of the “given,” i.e., the way in which I think about the Divine, is a necessary entry point for subsequent discussion of congregations, clergy, care and leadership.

The way one thinks about God is the foundation of all Christian theological loci, including ecclesiology and anthropology. In his forward to *The God We Never Knew*, Marcus Borg recounts a way of thinking about God that he received as a child. “Because of my Christian upbringing,” he writes,
…I thought that I knew what the word God meant: a supernatural being “out there” who created the world a long time ago and had occasionally intervened in the aeons since, especially in the events recorded in the Bible. God was not “here” but “somewhere else.” And someday, after death, we might be with God, provided that we had done or believed whatever was necessary to pass the final judgment.7

The central claim of Borg’s autobiographical account is that one’s concept of God matters. In this project the concept of God matters because from it emanate my foundational understandings of the church and its purpose, of local congregations, of a healthy congregation, and what care, leadership and help are for troubled congregations.

The foundational concept of the Divine informing this work is that God is on the side of life—life in the broadest sense of the word. In the words of ecological theologian, McFague, most basically, Christian faith claims “…that the universe is neither indifferent nor malevolent but that there is a power… which is on the side of life and its fulfillment.”8 Or, as process theologian, Marjorie Suchocki, puts it: “God is for us!”9 Yet again, in the spirit of church father, Irenaeus, “The glory of God is every creature fully alive.”10 Most basically, God is on the side of life.

---


8 McFague, Models of God, 8.


The primary thesis of this dissertation is that pastoral care and pastoral leadership of congregations hold in common the purpose of nurturing emergence in and of the congregation. Underlying this statement is an assumption that nurturing emergence is consistent with ‘what God is about.’ What God is about, is life. In the discussions of concepts of BFST and process theology in subsequent chapters, I expand on ways in which this understanding of the Divine shapes the understanding of congregations, care and leadership.

**Congregations**

At first glance, a description of the congregation and its purpose might appear self-evident. Deeper consideration, however, highlights the breadth of understandings of the body of Christ and its purpose—most of which can be traced back to underlying theological assumptions. In its broadest use, the word *congregation* describes any assembly or gathering of people, animals, or things. From the Latin, *concretatus*, it suggests an action of herding together, or to gather into a flock. Building on this understanding, Bennison defines a congregation as

…a group of people who identify with each other under a certain name, share a particular set of basic assumptions, and meet regularly to communicate to one another those assumptions through language, story, rite, ceremony, or social behavior.\[^{11}\]

The term congregation describes both the group of people, and the process of congregating or gathering together over time. Thus, groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Boy Scout troops, and the Rotary Club can be categorized as congregations.

In religious congregations, Bennison continues, “… the shared basic assumptions are religious ones about God and about life in the world in relation to God.” In Christian religious congregations, the shared basic assumptions about God are related to understandings and interpretations of God’s actions in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and how to live life in the world in relation to those understandings and interpretations.

As a local expression of a larger entity, a Christian congregation cannot be understood apart from its identity as part of the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ.” The assumptions and beliefs held by people in congregations are related to assumptions and beliefs of the broader church. The church is multi-faceted, and each facet offers multiple perspectives from which to view it. “Because of this,” observes theologian Ted Peters, “there are more theological disagreements over the doctrine of the church than any other locus” in theology.” In light of multiple and sometimes innovative interpretations, and with the assurance that any one definition of church or

---

12 Ibid., 25

congregation is not only impossible, but inadvisable, this discussion continues by viewing images of congregations, rather than written definitions.

New Testament Images

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:12

New Testament authors have presented the mystery that is the church almost entirely with images. As theologian Avery Cardinal Dulles notes, “The New Testament is extremely luxuriant in its ecclesiological imagery.”\textsuperscript{14} According to New Testament scholar Paul Minear, images serve three functions. They can be used (1) as rhetorical tools, (2) as modes for perceiving a given reality “that is not amenable to objective visibility or measurement,” and (3) as ways for individuals, groups, or societies to advance self-understanding.\textsuperscript{15} Images are helpful in attempts to understand a reality that is mystery, and to increase the self-understanding of those who seek to be in relationship with mystery.

Minear identifies ninety-six images of the church in New Testament writings. Approximately one-third of the images he classifies as minor. The remainder he groups into four major constellations of images of the church: the “people of God,” the “new


creation,” and “fellowship in faith,” and the “body of Christ.” In Minear’s estimation, however, the most familiar constellation of images of the church—the body of Christ—can be understood only in relationship to the larger spectrum of New Testament images.  

Although the image of the church as the body of Christ is primary in this understanding of congregations, following this discussion I present one additional and somewhat unusual image: *theotokos* or “God-bearer.” I adopt both as major images for this dissertation.

*The Body of Christ*

The image of the church as the body of Christ is central to this dissertation for several reasons. First, it is a deeply relational image of diverse, yet interconnected body parts. In a congregation, the many function as one yet remain many. Second, in First Corinthians, Paul used the image of the church as the body of Christ to suggest that divisions and exclusions in the congregation were as ludicrous as one body part rejecting another. Simply put, without mutual respect, acceptance, and care, the body cannot function. Third, an image of a congregation as a living organism illustrates the potential of the body to respond to its internal and external environment, to adapt, and thus, to change and grow. Finally, this image highlights the connection between Christ as God

---

16 Ibid.
incarnate in the world and the church as the continuing presence and purpose of God—that which was incarnate in Christ—in the world today.\textsuperscript{17}

According to biblical scholar Margaret Mitchell, Paul diagnosed and treated the problem in the congregation at Corinth as factionalism. Multiple positions held by multiple groups on multiple issues caused divisions, and Paul identified the divisions as “a deficiency and shortcoming from their theological calling to Christian unity and concord.”\textsuperscript{18} The metaphor of the congregation as the body of Christ challenged the congregation toward unity and care of all members, even those who might be less mature in the faith. The focus of the letter is the internal relationships of the congregation. In Chapter 13 Paul names love as the norm for relationships within the body. Thus he encourages individual responsibility as well as corporate concern.\textsuperscript{19}

While Paul’s focus was on the internal functioning of the congregational body, the image of the church as the Body of Christ also has been understood in terms of the congregation as Christ’s presence its broader context. New Testament scholar Alan Richardson writes:

The church is thus [as Christ’s body] the means of Christ’s work in the world; it is his hands and feet, his mouth and voice. As in his incarnate life, Christ had to

\textsuperscript{17} Other uses of the phrase “body of Christ” in Paul’s letters are in Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and Colossians 1-3. In light of the variety of ways in which Paul used the term, body of Christ, Minear cautions against attempting to “produce a single, inclusive definition of the image.” Ibid., 174.


have a body to proclaim his gospel and do his work, so in his resurrection life in
this age he still needs a body to be the instrument of his gospel and of his work in
the world.20

Although Paul does not directly define the church as the body of Christ in “the sense that
it becomes the sole means by which the living Christ carries on his work in the world,”
Minear does point out that this use of the image is consistent with Paul’s flexible use of
the body metaphor.21 In this project, the understanding of the congregation as the body of
Christ is inclusive of both internal relationships and the body’s relationship to the
external world.

*Theotokos*

In his lecture entitled “Reflections of a Clergy-Watcher,” given on the occasion of
his retirement from Duke University Divinity School, Jackson Carroll spoke of the
opportunity that pastors and priests have “to stand before a community week after week
as *theotokos*, a ‘God-bearer,’ representing God to the people and the people to God.”22
*Theotokos*, a compound of two Greek words, is translated literally as “the one who gives
birth to God.”23 It is not a scriptural term, although it is rooted deeply in the Christian

20 Alan Richardson, *Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (London: S.C.M. Press,


Scribner's Sons, 1985), 162-80.
tradition. Origen (d. 254) is believed to be the earliest of the Church Fathers to use the term *Theotokos* for Mary, mother of Jesus. The question of Mary’s title as *Theotokos* (mother of God) or *Christotokos* (mother of the Christ) played a central role in Christological controversies addressed in the Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus in 431, where the title *Theotokos* was recognized.24 Theologically, *Theotokos* affirms that as Mary’s son, Jesus is fully God and fully human. Although it is common in Orthodox churches, it is less familiar in the Roman Catholic and Protestant Christian traditions.

Episcopalian theologian Urban Holmes uses *theotokos* to describe the priest as a “sacramental person,” or “God-bearer” whose calling is to lead “people into the mystery that surrounds our life,” and to deepen “humanity’s understanding of itself by word and action, by the very nature of the priest’s presence.”25 This is the image Carroll puts forth in his description of clergy as God-bearers.

Although Carroll did not extend the image of *theotokos* to the congregation as whole, I believe this image is implied in his call for a shift from a pastor-centered to an ecclesial model of ministry. The ecclesial model, as he describes it,

…understands ministry to be the calling of the whole people of God; that educates the pastor to be the leader of a ministering community; that understands that every


congregation, however small or large, is called to be a present sign of God’s promised reign in its gathered and scattered life.\textsuperscript{26}

Thus, the congregation also can be described as \textit{theotokos}, bearing the presence of God to each other, neighbor, and the world. Addition of the image of congregation as \textit{theotokos} to the image of the congregation as the body of Christ intensifies the metaphor of God’s ongoing presence, as well as the call for the congregation to be that presence in the world.\textsuperscript{27}

Building on the basic theological assumption that God is on the side of life, and these two images, I offer the following basic understanding of the church and its congregations: The church and its congregations are human communities that share basic assumptions, among them the belief that God is on the side of life. The church and its congregations are \textit{theotokos}, bearer of God to each other, neighbors, and the world. The church, as the body of Christ, continues the ministry of Christ, at its ideal embodying the love of God in its particular context. Employing this intentionally broad definition, I expand my understanding of the way in which congregations embody the love and work of Christ in Chapter 6.

\textsuperscript{26} Carroll, "Reflections of a Clergy Watcher."

\textsuperscript{27} The idea of the congregation as \textit{theotokos} was brought into this project as it neared completion. Although I am intrigued by the image, it requires and will receive further development in the future. For now, I use the image to deepen the understanding of the congregation as the presence of God—of Christ—and to make space for creative thinking about the congregation’s purpose and how it is lived.
Contemporary Challenges to the Church

Mainline liberal Protestant congregations in North America face a number of challenges. Although a recent Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reported that fifty-one per cent of Americans indicate they are members of Protestant denominations, over the last decades of the twentieth century these denominations have experienced a steady decrease in membership. Evangelical Protestant and historically Black Protestant churches represent thirty-three percent of the adult Protestant population, while mainline Protestant churches represent eighteen percent. Mainline Protestant congregations are graying,’ as roughly half of the members are now age or fifty or older. The Pew report also points out that

…the proportion of the population that is Protestant has declined markedly in recent decades, while the proportion of the population that is not affiliated with any particular religion has increased significantly.28

Explanations for this decline in congregations as well as in apparent faith commitments abound, ranging from process theologian John Cobb’s identification of a lack of “strong, shared convictions among members” of faith communities, to the end of the baby boom among mainline churches, to “political orientations or internal disputes

28 Mainline Protestant congregations are those that were in existence at the beginning of the twentieth century, in distinction from Fundamentalist and Pentecostal churches that arose during that century. These include the Episcopal Church, the Disciples of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church. Mark Chaves, Congregations in America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); John B. Cobb, Reclaiming the Church: Where the Mainline Church Went Wrong and What to Do About It (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); Philip Clayton, Transforming Christian Theology: For Church and Society (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).
about doctrine or church policy.” In many cases, the descriptions and explanations of the plight of the church are accompanied by prescriptions that will reinvigorate congregations and the church in general. As congregations and wider church bodies decline in size, questions about survival generate anxiety in members, and especially in leaders.

A number of scholars place the decline of mainline denominations within the context of significant changes over the past decades. In her recent book, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*, church historian Phyllis Tickle locates the contemporary challenges faced by the church in North America in the broad context of societal, political, intellectual, and cultural changes of the twentieth century. Tickle contends that the “Great Emergence,” that has been “slipping up on us for decades,” is now at hand.

In an historical survey of the church, Tickle identifies pivotal times when, from seemingly unparalleled upheaval, new, more vital forms of Christianity emerged. As she describes it, about every five hundred years the church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale during which “the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at that time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered

---


in order that renewal and new growth may occur.” Five hundred years ago western Christianity experienced “The Great Reformation.” Five hundred years before that was the Great Schism. Another five hundred years earlier was the fall of the Roman Empire. Although the fall of Rome is better known Tickle holds that the work of Gregory the Great during that period held greater significance for the church. His accomplishment, according to Tickle, was in that he

…but led a continent that was in total upheaval into some kind of ecclesio-political coherence and, building on the work of St. Benedict, upon his having guided Christianity firmly into the monasticism that would protect, preserve, and characterize it during the next five centuries.33

When one considers five hundred years before Gregory the Great, one arrives at the first century and the birth of Christianity.

Tickle images religion as a “Holy Tether,” as “a cable of meaning that keeps the human social unit connected to some purpose and/or power greater than itself.” In this metaphor, the cable’s waterproof casing is the story, that is, “the shared history—mythic, actual, and assumed—of the social unit.” Inside the waterproof casing is a “loosely knit mesh sleeve” sometimes called the “consensual illusion” or the “common imagination.” Beneath awareness, believers often hold a common agreement about how the world works, about how it should be imaged and how it is understood. Inside the mesh sleeve

---

32 Ibid., 33
33 Ibid., 34
of this common imagination three strands of rope are braided together: spirituality, corporeality, and morality.\textsuperscript{34}

This cable, Tickle writes, “…does its job of securing human life to meaningfulness quite nicely so long as nothing threatens its parts.”\textsuperscript{35} About once every five hundred years, however, “…the outer casing of the story and the inner sleeve of the shared illusion take a blow simultaneously,” opening a hole straight through to the interior braided strands. At that point, being human, we reach into the hole, pull out the three strands, one at a time, examine each strand from every angle for understanding, and return it to its former place. By some means we “heal the rip in our illusion,” and then manage to “reseal the waterproof casing of our story.”\textsuperscript{36}

Over the years of the last century, the years leading up to the Great Emergence, the common story of the Christian Church (in particular the Protestant tradition) and its underlying principle of \textit{sola scriptura} as the authority on which we stand, has been, according to Tickle, “hacked to pieces.” Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle led to a recognition in the popular mind as well as in large segments of academia that “uncertainty” is the only fact that can be accepted as fact. Add to that many other factors, including Darwin’s theory of evolution, the exploration of the unconscious by Freud, \textsuperscript{34} Tickle defines \textit{morality} as “the externalization and/or objective enactment and application of the values and experiences of the individual or individuals who compose a society.” \textit{Corporeality} is a fairly simple concept that names “all the overt, physical—i.e., ‘embodied’—evidence that a religion exists.” Ibid., 36.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 36-37.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 36-38.
Jung, and others, the advent of television, radio, and technology, feminism, changes in family structure, and developments in cognitive science—and there is little choice but to re-examine the inner strands of the holy tether.

Tickle’s theory of the Great Emergence has been given significant attention here because I believe that she has named the primary contemporary challenges of the church. The countless changes of the last century, plus the increasing rapidity of these changes have blown apart the story and authority that was foundational to the post-Reformation church. It is possible, although only with difficulty, to pretend that the old story still holds, and that the “holy tether” remains intact. Churches that continue to hold to the literal interpretation of scripture while denying many of the findings of the natural sciences are attempting to do this. It is possible as well to ignore the challenges and changes the past century has posed to the common story and consensual illusion. It is becoming more difficult to do so, however, and failure to rethink theology contributes to the seeming irrelevance of the Christian story and Christian Church to many people. This failure to adapt to change also contributes to the decline of mainline Protestant denominations.

The basic understanding of the church offered above describes the church and its congregations as human communities that share basic assumptions, among them the belief that God is on the side of life. In the person and ministry of Christ, God incarnate, we gain an understanding of God’s actions in the world and love for the world. The
church and its congregations are called to be theotokos, bearer of God to each other, neighbor, and the world. The church, as the body of Christ, continues the ministry of Christ in the world, at its ideal, embodying the love of God in its particular context. This definition is actually a call. The reality is that it is not humanly possible. In this time of turmoil, upheaval and emergence, careful study of what it means to be church, in any of its expressions, is necessary.

Importance and Gifts of Congregations

Despite contemporary challenges to the North American mainline liberal Protestant congregations it is important to acknowledge their importance in the culture as well as in the lives of individuals and families. This acknowledgement begins with a broad view that is inclusive of all religious congregations, and then turns to consider mainline congregations.

As sociologist of religion Nancy Ammerman, points out, “one of the most enduring features of the American landscape is the steeple, a landmark signaling the presence of a congregation.” Ammerman continues:

Whether small and simple or towering and ornate, whether soaring alongside skyscrapers or rising out of the rolling hills of the countryside or subtly blending into the sameness of a suburban housing development, the spaces set aside by Christian crosses, Jewish Stars of David, Muslim minarets, and other religious markers are the single most pervasive gathering places in American society.\(^{37}\)

\(^{37}\) Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 1.
Religious congregations, marked almost from the beginning by their voluntary nature as well as their diversity, have been central to life in America. In every community congregations provide places for gathering and sociability. They are laboratories for civic learning and participation as well as places of moral guidance and nurture. There people find “points of contact with transcendent powers that can work transformative miracles small and large.”

Congregations are networked into their communities. Members, families, related organizations, and even governmental partnerships are connections through which the congregation is able to know and respond to its community. Whether it is a daycare or senior center housed by the congregation, an outreach ministry into the community, the use of the facility by community groups, the employment of members in various services and jobs, or the participation of children in schools and community activities, the congregational body is connected to innumerable people in innumerable ways.

Although the contributions of congregations listed above are primarily sociological, these gifts are related directly to efforts of faith communities to live their lives in response and relationship to their faith. Thus, although there is a sociological aspect to the contributions named above, they generally are rooted in spirituality—spirituality that is nurtured and strengthened in worship, learning, service, and fellowship.

---

38 Ibid., 7.
The gifts of the church named above, while not in any way exhaustive, are descriptive of most religious congregations. This leads to a question however of what, if anything, might be distinctive to mainline Protestant congregations. In the conclusion of her study on vital mainline Protestant congregations, Diana Butler Bass offers a summary of what she heard from hundreds of other churchgoers: “Transformation is the promise at the heart of the Christian life.” For the “rest of us” (meaning mainline Protestants in contrast to evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants), Christianity

…is not about personal salvation, not about getting everybody else saved, or about the politics of exclusion and moral purity. Christianity for the rest of us is the promise of transformation—that, by God’s mercy, we can be different, our congregations can be different, and our world can be different.39

Perhaps one of the significant gifts of mainline Protestant congregations is their rootedness in deep traditions of Christianity that, over the centuries, have faced the challenge of maintaining relevance for the Christian faith in light of an ever-changing world through ongoing processes of transformation.

Healthy Congregations

In light of this discussion of congregations and the efforts to articulate starting points for the subsequent discussion, it is appropriate to end this section with a basic understanding of a healthy congregation. Earlier in this chapter I offered the following description:

39 Bass, Christianity for the Rest of Us, 281.
The church and its congregations are human communities that share basic assumptions, among them the belief that God is on the side of life. The church and its congregations are *theotokos*, bearer of God to each other, neighbor, and the world. The Church, as the body of Christ, continues the ministry of Christ in the world, at its ideal, embodying the love of God in its particular context.

Based on this description, a healthy congregation is one that is able to bear God to each other, neighbors, and the world, that is, to embody the love of God in its particular context. In the final chapters of this work, I address these questions in light of BFST and concepts of process theology. For now I follow Ammerman’s lead and suggest “if there is a measure of success, it is simply the congregation’s survival as the institution it determines it should be.”

Survival in an era of swift and significant change requires some level of adaptation. Although the measure of health is expanded, survival is a starting point.

**Clergy**

*There is no dearer treasure, no nobler thing on earth or in this life than a good and faithful pastor and preacher.*

--Martin Luther, *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School*

I continue this endeavor to articulate the foundational concepts of this pastoral theology with a consideration of clergy. Despite his exaggeration in the above epigraph about pastors as “dear and noble treasures,” Luther accurately recognized the importance of “good and faithful” pastors in the life of a congregation. As Carroll observes, “few

---

40 Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*, 5.
congregations will find it possible to exhibit vitality and excellence in the face of poor pastoral leadership.”

Thus it is important to look more closely at clergy, at the office, their unique role, and contemporary challenges. Although ordained ministers serve in other settings as well, the focus here is on clergy serving in congregational ministry.

**The Office of Pastor**

Christian clergy stand in a tradition stretching back through two thousand years of church history, with roots going back further to the religious institutions of ancient Israel. The ministry of Jesus was the “original formative episode” on which Christian ministry has drawn, and is foundational to the self-understanding of clergy. Rooted in the Hebraic tradition of prophet, priest and rabbi, Jesus preached, taught, healed and served. He instructed his disciples to eat and drink “in remembrance of him” (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24-25 NRSV). He told them “whatever you bind in earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 18:18 NRSV). He commanded them to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19 NRSV). Thus, Christian ministry in most forms involves preaching, teaching, healing (pastoral care), and serving, as well as evangelism, presiding at baptisms and the Eucharistic meal, calling for...

---


repentance, and offering forgiveness of sins. It also involves leadership of the congregational body as a whole.

There are variations between faith traditions as well as within them in terms of the priorities given to particular ministry tasks. Broadly speaking, between faith traditions Protestant clergy give greater priority to preaching and teaching, while Catholics and those in Orthodox churches place greater focus on the priestly, sacramental roles. Nonetheless, core tasks of leading worship, preaching, teaching, offering pastoral care, and reaching out to the larger community are similar across traditions.\(^{43}\)

In most cases, the clerical position involves the setting apart of an individual for this office. The root of the word *clergy* is from the Greek *kleroi*, referring to the “lots” cast by the disciples to select a replacement for Judas (Acts 1:26), and to “the pastoral spheres allotted to the elders of the community.” Although early usage of the term included bishops and elders set aside through the laying on of hands as well as everyone else involved in ministry, by the end of the third century it was used only in reference to those who underwent ordination: bishops, elders, and deacons.\(^{44}\)

The understanding of the office is related to the form and grounding of its authority. Drawing on sociological traditions from Max Weber, Holifield identifies three forms of religious authority. First is the “charisma of office” that claims the bestowal of a

---


\(^{44}\) Holifield, *God's Ambassadors*, 14.
“distinctive gift of spiritual power” during the ritual of ordination. In this conceptualization, central to Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, the priesthood is understood as “a channel for the transmission of divine grace.” The second form of authority is described as the “charisma of person.” Here, based on the claim of having received a divine gift accompanied by a divine call, an individual is able to assert the right to represent Christ. The third form, “rational authority,” appeals to the knowledge and skill an individual has to promote the work and purpose of the church. This knowledge and skill, in most cases, is gained by special education, and by virtue of that education, clergy are set aside from the laity.\footnote{Ibid., 2.}

Holifield asserts that these three modes of authority can be seen in play through “a complex series of episodes” in the unfolding history of ministry in America. However, he reports that currently, many pastors believe, “with good reason, that their authority has once again become more personal and less official: their authority depends more on who they are and what they do than on the office they occupy.”\footnote{Ibid.}

A Unique Role

Despite differences in understandings of the source of authority, the role of a congregational minister is distinctive. Called to serve as leader and shepherd of the faith community, the minister is in a unique position in relationship to the congregation as a
whole. Whether designated as the pastoral shepherd who cares for and leads the flock, or
the priestly Father or Mother who cares for and leads the children, the position is one of
responsibility and trust. Called and charged with speaking words consistent with the
understanding of God in a particular faith tradition, those words as well as the actions of
a pastor are understood to be reflective of the presence of the Divine. As noted earlier,
each week pastors and priests have the opportunity “to stand before a community… as
theotokos, a ‘God-bearer,’ representing God to the people and the people to God.”
One’s understanding of what that means is crucial.

The minister of a congregation has a unique connection with and entrée into
families of the congregation. There is no other profession in which one is able to develop
long-term relationships with all members of a nuclear, and possibly extended, family.
Pastors watch children grow, hear concerns and joys, and offer the resources of their faith
tradition. Further, they are invited into families at nodal points in their lives—births,
marriages, divorces, severe illnesses, and death—times of heightened anxiety when the
presence of God is sought. Although there are significant variations in the spiritual
authority granted to clergy by families, the office itself garners respect and offers
opportunities to be present, to listen to pain, fears, and joys, and to speak words of hope
and counsel.

47 Carroll, "Reflections of a Clergy Watcher."
Contemporary Challenges

Although clergy have experienced challenges during all periods of history, from the limited perspective of one’s particular context it often appears that the challenges of one’s own time and place are unique and/or greater. I agree with Tickle, however, in her assessment of the particular contemporary challenges presented by the myriad of changes of the last century, and the way in which these changes have eroded the story and authority that was foundational to the post-Reformation church are unique to this period in time. Just as they impact congregations and people of faith, they impact clergy leaders. In addition to these, however, it is important to acknowledge several challenges that for clergy are closer to home, and are significant enough to cause some to leave the profession.

In interviews of clergy, Carroll listed the following issues, identified by some clergy as serious enough to question staying in ministry:

- inadequate compensation, at least for many clergy in small and mid-sized congregations;
- congregational conflict and criticism that are allowed to fester and remain unresolved;
- stress from congregational challenges and demands, especially as they prevent pastors from spending quality time with their family or from having adequate time for recreation, reflection, and renewal;
• issues regarding the pastoral role, especially the difficulty of maintaining a private life apart from one’s role as pastor, as well as being treated differently because one is a pastor;
• experiences of loneliness and isolation.\textsuperscript{48}

These are significant issues for some pastors. However, they are not significant issues for all clergy. Carroll also reports being surprised by the high level of commitment to their calling, and the high level of work satisfaction of a majority of the clergy interviewed.\textsuperscript{49}

Clergy leaders face significant challenges. Yet, they are not insurmountable.

#### Care and Leadership

The purpose of this dissertation is to develop a pastoral theology of care and leadership of congregations. Thus a preliminary task is to consider ways in which these widely used yet difficult to define terms are to be understood in this project. In this section I present working definitions. These working definitions are reconsidered in Chapter 6, in light of BFST and concepts of process theology.

\textsuperscript{48}———, \textit{God's Potters}, 186.

\textsuperscript{49}Ibid.
Care

As far back as the Latin literature of ancient Rome, the notion of care, or cura has been ambiguous. Warren Reich identifies two fundamentally conflicting meanings in early use of the term:

On the one hand, it meant worries, troubles, or anxieties, as when one says that a person is ‘burdened with cares.’ On the other hand, care meant providing for the welfare of another; aligned with this latter meaning was the positive connotation of care as attentive conscientiousness or devotion.\[50\]

Additional meanings of the notion of care have developed through history, including care as “solicitous, responsible attention to tasks—taking care of the needs of people and one’s own responsibilities,” and caring about, “having a regard for, or showing attentive care for a person, for his or her growth, and so forth.”\[51\]

Much historical literature regarding the meaning of care describes ancient practices known as cura animarum, the cure or care of souls. In this tradition, the word care refers to the tasks involved in caring for an individual or group, as well as to the “inner experience of solicitude or carefulness concerning the object of one’s care.”\[52\]

Although the word soul is understood in various ways, John McNeil’s broad description is helpful. He writes,

---


\[51\] Ibid., 349.

\[52\] Ibid., 351.
The soul is the essence of human personality. It is related to the body, but it is not a mere expression or function of the bodily life. It is capable of vast ranges of experience and susceptible of disorder and anguish; but it is indestructible and endowed with possibilities of blessedness within and beyond the order of time.\(^53\) The cure of souls, according to McNeil, involves “the sustaining and curative treatment of persons in those matters that reach beyond the requirements of animal life.”\(^54\) The tradition of pastoral care is rooted in the *cura animarum*.

Since the Reformation, the word *pastoral* has had two senses. In the first, it is simply a functional extension of the noun *pastor* that conveys the idea that anything done by a pastor is pastoral. In the second, pastoral is related directly to the biblical metaphor of shepherding—of feeding or tending the flock—and pastoral activities are understood to be just one of a number of different functions of the clergyperson and the church.\(^55\)

Despite the centrality of the metaphor of shepherding in the history of the church and in the pastoral theological method developed by Hiltner, in recent decades both the use of the term *pastoral* and the understanding of *pastoral care* have been challenged. In light of contemporary society’s lack of connection to agrarian practices, is the shepherd

---


\(^54\) Ibid.

\(^55\) Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology*, 15.
metaphor useful? Is there an implicit use of power” in the term? What about its traditional connection to the Christian tradition, in light of religious pluralism?\textsuperscript{56}

Understandings and definitions of pastoral care also have undergone changes in recent decades. Although not the sole definition of pastoral care, for many years Clebsch and Jaekle’s understanding, as presented in Chapter 1, was used extensively. According to Clebsch and Jaekle, pastoral care consists of

…helping acts done by representative Christian persons, directed toward the healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling of troubled persons whose troubles arise in the context of ultimate meanings and concerns.\textsuperscript{57}

Among others, these questions have been raised: Must pastoral care be offered only in the context of “ultimate meanings and concerns,” or might all helping acts of love, charity, and mercy be considered pastoral care?\textsuperscript{58} Is the focus of pastoral care on individuals only, or does pastoral care also address contextual and societal issues that contribute to the troubles of many persons? Who offers pastoral care—just the pastor?\textsuperscript{59}


\textsuperscript{57} Clebsch and Jaekle, \textit{Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective}, 4.


These questions have produced shifts in definition. For example, rather than being just the role of clergy, pastoral care is seen by many to be the ministry of the whole faith community, and sometimes is described as *congregational care*.⁶⁰

Another example of change in understanding of the concept is the broadening of supportive aspects of pastoral care described by Clebsch and Jaekle (healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling) to include, among other things, advocacy. Thus pastoral care is extended beyond individuals to address institutions and societal structures. A definition of pastoral care offered by Graham includes the perspective of advocacy and two additional shifts: first, the expansion of the pastoral care response beyond individuals to groups; and second, care of the natural order.⁶¹

Given the shifts outlined above, a return to the traditional understanding of pastor as shepherd, made by pastoral theologian John Patton, is interesting. Images of Psalm 23 are central to Patton’s guide to pastoral care. He writes:

> The words ‘pastor’ and ‘pastoral’ are associated with the image and function of the shepherd and with representing the shepherd Lord described in the psalm. ‘He restores my soul.’ ‘He leads me in right paths.’ ‘I fear no evil’ because the shepherd is with me. The focus of the psalm is on the presence and guidance of the Lord in restoring the soul of those in ‘the darkest valley.’ The essential

---


⁶¹ Graham, *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds*, 49.
ministry of those who follow that Lord is to offer presence and guidance toward the restoring of soul.\textsuperscript{62}

To restore the soul, according to Patton, involves reminding a person “that he or she is a child of God created in and for relationship.”\textsuperscript{63} It involves being present in the dark valleys of life, and guiding those who are lost toward life. Patton’s understanding of presence is considered later in relationship to Friedman’s understanding of the presence of the pastor as a variable in nurturing emergence. It is interesting that Patton’s work once again grounds pastoral care in the ancient tradition of the cure of souls.

\textit{A Beginning Definition of Pastoral Care}

There are many definitions and understandings of pastoral care. The preliminary understanding of pastoral care for this project, to be used in consideration of pastoral care of a congregational body, is borrowed from Patton. Pastoral care is presence and guidance toward the restoring of soul.

A congregation that is suffering and in need of care can be described as having lost its way and wandering in a dark valley. Its vitality is lessening. As a body, it is having difficulty remembering its relationship to the Divine, as well as ways in which relationships inside and outside of the faith community reflect their relationship to God.

---


\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 4.
The “restoring of soul” involves moving toward life, toward that which God is about.\textsuperscript{64} Based on this historical review of the term, my working definition of “pastoral care” is the restoring of the soul of a congregation.

**Leadership**

Warren Bennis, described by Forbes magazine as “the dean of leadership gurus,” began his introduction to an issue of *American Psychologist* devoted solely to the topic of leadership with this statement: “After studying leadership for six decades, I am struck by how small is the body of knowledge of which I am sure.”\textsuperscript{65} Echoes of this are heard in a lament expressed by Bernard Bass, another author of multiple volumes on leadership: “There are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept.”\textsuperscript{66}

Although the body of knowledge about which Bennis is sure may be small, the massiveness of literature on the topic of leadership is overwhelming, and through it all, there is no formal, standardized definition. However, several components have been identified as central. First, leadership is a process. Second, it involves influence. Third, leadership is an influence process.

\textsuperscript{64} In 1995, “Restoring the Soul of a Church” was published, the focus of which is victims, families, congregations, and wider communities in the wake of clergy sexual misconduct. Beyond the title, there is no specific reference to care of a congregation as “restoring the soul of a congregation.” Nancy Myer Hopkins, ed. *Restoring the Soul of a Church* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1995).


leadership occurs within the context of a group, and fourth, it involves the attainment of goals. Based on these components, Peter Northouse suggests the following as a definition of leadership: “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.”\textsuperscript{67}

Leadership theories can be gathered loosely into three broad categories: (1) those that identify traits or attributes of the leader as the primary variable in effectiveness; (2) those that identify situational factors as the primary variable in effectiveness; and (3) interactionist theories that relate both traits of the leader and situational variables to effectiveness.\textsuperscript{68}

One of the newer and more encompassing interactionist theories, transformational leadership, focuses on how leaders are able to inspire followers toward great accomplishments. In this view, leadership is a process through which individuals are changed and transformed. Rooted in the work of political sociologist James MacGregor Burns, this perspective describes leaders as “individuals who tap the motives of followers in order to better reach the goals of leaders and followers.”\textsuperscript{69} Significantly different from the view of leadership as power wielding, this perspective understands leadership as inseparable from the needs of the follower.


In 1985, Bernard Bass offered an expanded and refined version of transformational leadership. According to Bass, “transformational leadership motivates followers to do more than the expected” by doing the following:

- raising followers’ levels of consciousness about the importance and value of specified and idealized goals,
- getting followers to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the team or organization, and
- moving followers to address higher-level needs.70

Four factors are involved in transformational leadership. The first factor, called charisma or idealized influence, describes leaders as strong role models for followers. The second factor, inspiration or inspirational motivation, describes leaders who are able to communicate high expectations to followers, inspiring and motivating them to commit to and become part of the organization’s shared vision. Factor three, intellectual stimulation, describes leadership that stimulates creativity and innovation in followers, while simultaneously challenging beliefs and values of the leader as well as the organization. The fourth factor, individualized consideration is a characteristic of leaders who create a supportive climate of careful listening to the needs of followers.71


71 Northouse, Leadership, 175-77.
Bass understands transformational leadership to be at one end of a spectrum of leadership approaches. At the opposite end is “laissez-faire leadership,” which is characterized essentially by passivity and a lack of leadership. In the center of the spectrum is “transactional leadership,” characterized by factors of contingent reward, an exchange process between leaders and followers, and management by exception, “leadership that involves corrective criticism, negative feedback, and negative reinforcement.”  

My purpose for looking this extensively at the theory of transformation leadership is this: at first glance, it appears that this very popular approach to leadership is consonant with BFST and Friedman’s thinking about leadership. With deeper study, however, significant differences are revealed. I discuss these differences further in Chapter 4. Despite this, however, I draw on this below to develop a working definition of pastoral leadership.

Although the term pastoral leadership has less history in the church, especially as compared to the term pastoral care, the concept receives significant attention in contemporary church literature. Within the church, it does not take long for leadership theories and metaphors from the business world to be reformulated for application in congregations.

---

72 Ibid., 178-79.
The question at hand is, how does the understanding of leadership change with the addition of the adjective *pastoral*? Return for a moment to the definition offered above: "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal." Building on this definition, the term *pastoral* describes the individual who influences members of congregations. Thus the term takes on a very functional sense: pastoral leadership is leadership offered by an individual who is a pastor.

However, leadership does not occur in a vacuum. It is always in relationship to others. Pastoral leadership is leadership of a group of individuals that gathers together as a congregation. As discussed above, a congregation is a human community whose members share basic assumptions about God. Further, the church and its congregations stand as *theotokos*, bearer of God to each other, neighbor, and the world. As the body of Christ, the congregation continues the ministry of Christ in the world, at its ideal, embodying the love of God in its particular context. Pastoral leadership, a function of the pastoral office, is further defined by the purpose of the congregation. Thus, a purpose of pastoral leadership is to equip the saints—to build up the body of Christ to stand as *theotokos*, bearing and embodying the love of God.

Building on Northouse’s definition of leadership and the above discussion, I offer the following working definition: pastoral leadership is a process whereby a
congregational pastor (theotokos) influences a congregation to be theotokos, bearer of God to each other, neighbor, and the world. This definition has the advantage of including the central components Northouse identifies for leadership: process, influence, group, and goals.

In subsequent chapters of this dissertation, I extend and nuance these working definitions of congregation, pastoral care and pastoral leadership in light of Bowen Family Systems Theory and its application by Rabbi Edwin Friedman to congregations and leadership, as well as by aspects of process theology.
CHAPTER 3. BOWEN FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY AND FRIEDMAN: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOWEN/FRIEDMAN AXIS

The way one thinks about a phenomenon governs the way one addresses it.

Michael Kerr

Introduction

Pastoral theology, as understood in this project, begins with a situation of human suffering and need, attends to theological questions raised by the practice of care in response to that need, and brings theological and cognate resources into conversation in order to appropriately shape care.¹ The focus of this project is congregational bodies that are experiencing difficulties in living out their mission, as they define it. They are unable to function. The body is not healthy, and the congregation is in need of pastoral care, or help, to restore health.

The purpose of help is to increase the faith community’s ability to live together and in the larger context in ways that are consistent with their assumptions about God and God’s desire for the church. The challenge, however, lies in identifying and addressing factors that contribute to the problems. Underlying every effort to help are conceptualizations—often unarticulated—of health, of factors that diminish and/or

¹ Hiltner, Preface to Pastoral Theology.
destroy health, and of actions that promote and increase it. There are broad variations, however, in these conceptualizations of human behavior, problems, and functioning. The first step in the development of this pastoral theology of congregational care and leadership is to articulate my understanding of problems, and subsequently, care and help for congregations.

This project draws on a theory of human behavior developed by Murray Bowen and applied to congregations, clergy, and leadership by Edwin Friedman. Like all systems theories, Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST) shifts the focus from the individual to the broader system, assuming that an individual’s behavior is related to the larger group. As noted in Chapter 1, with the contributions of Rabbi Friedman, BFST has become a significant tool for many clergy in working with congregations.

BFST represents a set of inductively produced concepts based on careful observations of human behavior in family relationships. These concepts describe the family as an emotional unit or system that strongly influences and possibly even determines the behavior of individual members of the family. The theory provides a deductive way to think about problems in the human family. As well, it provides a way to focus on general areas that underlie all human behavior and appear to be important in understanding the human phenomenon.

In the Handbook of Family Therapy Friedman writes, “It would be difficult to do justice to the depth and complexities of Bowen theory within the framework of an entire
book, no less the confines of a single chapter.”\textsuperscript{2} A theory of human behavior rooted in the breadth of life is complicated. The interdependence of concepts and circular way in which knowledge of one contributes to understanding of others increase the challenge of this introduction. Add to the equation Friedman’s slightly different approach to and extensions of BFST, and complications increase. Because it is impossible to provide a full description of the theory in the limited space available, I emphasize aspects of the theory most applicable to this project. In this chapter I will introduce BFST and in the next chapter I will apply it to congregations, clergy, pastoral care, and pastoral leadership. My interpretation of this complex theory is rooted in Bowen’s work and shaped by Friedman’s interpretations of it. As well, it is shaped by my own use of the theory in congregations, counseling, and life in general.

\textbf{Theory Development: Bowen Plus Friedman}

The first section of this chapter describes the initial impetus for and development of a theory of human behavior in which the focus shifted from individuals, to families, to broader relationship systems.

\textsuperscript{2} Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 134.
The oldest of five children in a tight-knit family, Bowen grew up in a small town in Tennessee where his parents ran a funeral parlor and furniture store. Following medical school and internship, he served as a medic in Europe in World War II. Upon his return to the states, his growing interest in understanding emotional and psychological problems experienced by soldiers led him to shift his focus from surgery to psychiatry.

Bowen’s formal career in psychiatry began in 1946 at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas. Finding discrepancies between his observations of patients and their difficulties and the accepted psychoanalytically based explanations he began to question some of the theoretical foundations of psychoanalytic theory. Bowen perceived the problem to be related to the subjective nature of many of Freud’s most influential ideas.

As Kerr describes it, the problem with studying the human is that

…we are enough emotionally involved with ourselves—at least this appears to be the root of the problem—that it has been difficult to make reasonably objective observations about man’s [sic] emotional functioning and behavior. The observations have frequently been clouded by the subjective bias of the observer. Subjectivity has probably been even more influential in the development of explanations or actual theories of human behavior.\(^3\)

\(^3\) Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 18.

81
Although human study of the human phenomenon cannot escape some subjectivity, Bowen was concerned “that the amount of subjectivity effectively precluded Freudian theory from ever becoming an accepted science.”

Convinced that the study of the human mind could be as much of a science as study of the rest of the human, Bowen resolved to develop a theory of human behavior that could be accepted as one of the natural sciences. This goal, which became his life-long odyssey, involved extensive reading and study in the natural sciences, meticulous observation of and clinical work with patients suffering a broad range of difficulties, and a formal research process during which hypotheses were formed, tested, and revised until formal theoretical concepts could be developed.

The odyssey began in 1946 at Menninger Clinic. Working with patients diagnosed with schizophrenia, Bowen observed that mother and child appeared to fused together into a single, symbiotic unit in which the behavior, thinking, and feeling of each was intimately tied to that of the other. Although symbiotic relationships between mother and infant are common among all mammals and necessary for the survival of the infant, it is unusual for the symbiosis to continue as the infant grows into adulthood. Bowen

---


hypothesized that “the basic character problem, on which clinical schizophrenia is later superimposed, is an unresolved symbiotic attachment to the mother.”

The second stage of the odyssey, at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) in Bethesda, Maryland, began in 1954. There Bowen tested his hypothesis by finding, as he described it, “the most intense possible clinical examples of attachments between schizophrenic patients and their mothers in which the symbiotic process was still active” and moving the pairs into the hospital where both received treatment and where he was able to carefully observe them and their relationships. Early in the research Bowen and his team made several striking observations: (1) The symbiotic relationship patterns included “closeness-distance cycles.” (2) Anxiety transferred fluidly back and forth between mother and child. (3) During distance episodes of the closeness-distance cycles, both mother and daughter made attempts to “combine with” outsiders and form relationships that “had the same qualities as the central symbiotic relationship.” (4) Although the mother-child pair appeared to be “two people living and acting and being for each other,” their relationship was just “a dependent fragment of a larger family group.” As the influence of other family members on the dyad’s functioning became evident, Bowen adjusted his original hypothesis to posit that the influential relationships also included the father/husband and other children.

---

6 Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 4.

7 Ibid., 5.

8 Ibid., 5-10. Italics in the original.
As Bowen describes it, the family, as a whole, operates as an undifferentiated ego mass or emotional unit. To a significant extent, the thinking, feeling, and behavior of any individual in the family is related to and driven by the thinking, feeling, and behavior of others in the family—or by the perceived thinking, feeling, and behavior of others. As levels of fusion and togetherness of the family increase, so do levels of sensitivity to one another. Bowen hospitalized entire nuclear families of patients with schizophrenia to further test this hypothesis, and observe the family as an emotional unit.

The third stage of Bowen’s odyssey began in 1959 with a move to Georgetown University Medical Center where he extended his research to include individuals and families experiencing problems less severe than schizophrenia. Here his work suggested that differences between severe and less severe problems were quantitative rather than qualitative. While every family functions as a unit, Bowen observed that families in which the fusion is more intense experience more severe difficulties and/or have less capacity to respond to significant challenges. He suggested using a broad continuum or scale to think about differences in family functioning.

Lowest on the scale were those who had never lived outside an institution. Above that was the full scale of the schizophrenias, from the chronically impaired to those with simple psychoses. Above that was the large group of borderline states, including manic depression, the addictions, stealing, sexual problems, and physical illnesses. Above that were the neurotic states. Above that were those

9 Ibid., 74.
10 Kerr and Bowen, Family Evaluation, 10, 44.
11 Ibid., 12.
who were symptom free, but who had a potential for future symptoms. Highest of all was an assumed state of perfect differentiation with total freedom between feelings and facts.12

This continuum, described by Bowen as the *scale of differentiation*, offers a way of thinking about differences in human functioning.

By the 1960s Bowen had developed six concepts to the extent that they could be used to tell a “coherent story of the functioning of a particular family across time.”

- differentiation of self
- triangles
- nuclear family emotional process
- family projection process
- multigenerational transmission process
- sibling position. 13

Bowen’s intention was to build a theory based on observed facts that was open to being reshaped and reformed by new and more careful observations of human interactions and nature. His goal was to develop a scientific theory of human behavior. Although the theory has not achieved that status, to this point it has not been invalidated by contemporary scientific findings. Bowen’s commitment to science and facts continues in the research of faculty members at the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, as

well as in multidisciplinary conferences that include presentations by researchers from a broad spectrum of natural sciences, including immunology, neurobiology, ethology, and genetics.  

Edwin Friedman: The Metaphor Man

Edwin Friedman, the only child of a Jewish couple, grew up in a three-generation home on the upper west side of Manhattan. In 1959, after graduating from Bucknell University and Hebrew Union College, he was ordained as a Reform rabbi. After serving at Temple Shalom in the Washington D.C. area he worked in community relations for the Johnson White House. In 1964 he became the founding rabbi of the Bethesda Jewish Congregation, began training as a lay therapist, and encountered Bowen.

Friedman described his initial encounters with Bowen to members of a clergy seminar, shortly after Bowen’s death. He told them, “I only had to listen to Bowen twice and I said, ‘My God, he is putting together everything that I’ve been thinking—what is happening in congregations!’ I took to it like a duck to water!” Friedman began clinical supervision with Bowen in 1966. He became a regular participant in symposia

---


and seminars at the Georgetown University Department of Psychiatry and began to publish in the field.

Friedman’s application of BFST to congregations and clergy, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, was published in 1985. It immediately struck a chord with clergy. In a 1989 letter to Bowen, Friedman wrote:

I was privileged to be the only person on this planet who because of 20 years in the active rabbinate and an overlapping 20 years of thinking Bowen theory was in a position to see how stuck religion was with the individual model, if not the social sciences generally, and how many of the concepts of Bowen theory could bring about a significant revolution in the thinking of religious leaders.\(^{17}\)

The “revolution in the thinking of religious leaders” Friedman wrote about in 1989 has continued. He developed seminar programs for clergy and other helping professionals and spoke to diverse audiences all around the country. *Friedman’s Fables*, published in 1990, combined the rabbi’s storytelling skills, imagination, and experience with the challenges of being human into a collection of fables that are somewhat outrageous while being quite true to life.\(^{18}\) *Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* was published posthumously, and hailed as an unfinished symphony.\(^{19}\) Almost 25 years after its initial release *Generation to Generation* continues to be published.

While Bowen focused on developing a scientific theory of human behavior, Friedman used BFST as his lens on the world and the human phenomenon. Looking

---

\(^{17}\) Friedman, *Generation to Generation*; Edwin H. Friedman, Personal letter February 9 1989.


\(^{19}\) Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*. 87
through this lens at everything from history, to biology, to congregations, to families, to family therapy, to professions, to governments, to leaders, he observed influences of chronic anxiety and differentiation, forces for individuality and togetherness, and other aspects of BFST. He used playfulness, metaphor, fables, and history to present Bowen’s concepts in ways that allowed readers and listeners to identify emotional processes in themselves as well as in their surrounding emotional systems.

In the years before his death in 1996, Friedman moved beyond application of the theory to congregations and clergy to talk about leadership in general. He posited that differentiation is leadership. Using an organic, wholistic view of life at all levels, he suggested that leadership is a healing modality.

The Bowen/Friedman Axis

Although Friedman’s work was rooted in BFST, the moniker bestowed upon him by Bowen, *The Metaphor Man*, illuminates differences between the two. Toward the end of his life Bowen increasingly focused on his theory’s connections to science. Friedman, in contrast, focused on using the theory to understand and promote life in every sense. He drew on European and American history as well as Greek mythology to offer illustrations of anxiety, emotional process in society, and differentiation of self.

---

20 The shift of focus to science is evident in the speakers who participated in the Family Center symposia and conferences. In the earlier decades, speakers included other family therapy giants, such as Jay Haley, Salvador Minuchin, and Don Jackson. In later years the majority of presenters came from such fields as sociobiology, anthropology, neuroscience, endocrinology, and genetics.
Using metaphors, he drew broad connections between physiological and human relationship processes. Bowen, coming from a more positivistic philosophy of science, worked to establish a theory of human behavior that would overcome the subjectivity inherent in any human study of self and meet the rigorous requirements of an objective natural science. Friedman, in recognition of the influence of context (i.e., politics, competition, history) on scientific discoveries suggested that a more accurate understanding of the world may be gained more through adventure and the willingness to try than collection of data and “thinking right.”

There are both irony and theory in the relationship between Bowen and Friedman. Bowen’s odyssey toward science was a response to the subjectivity he saw in psychoanalytic theory. Through careful study and observation, and efforts to be as objective as possible about the human phenomenon, he carefully developed and tested hypotheses. And then along came this rabbi who took to the theory “like a duck takes to water” because he found, as do many clergy, that it described his experience in congregations. However, rather than continuing Bowen’s emphasis on science, the rabbi took the theory into many situations less amenable to scientific verification, including mythology, history, religion (to an extent) and leadership. He used fables to communicate concepts.

---

21 Friedman, Failure of Nerve.

22 Ibid., 33.
With Friedman’s application of theory to congregations and clergy, awareness of BFST has spread far beyond the therapeutic world in which it was born. The irony is this, however: In his retreat from the subjectivity of psychoanalytic theory, Bowen did everything within his power to study the human phenomenon objectively. Rabbi Friedman then took his objective theory, threw it open to look at all of life, and used metaphor to help others understand and use it.

In the midst of irony, however, is theory. The cornerstone concept of BFST is differentiation of self, i.e., the capacity to maintain a self in relationship. Reflecting on his relationship with Bowen, Friedman asked, “How does one differentiate from the differentiated one?”

How does a disciple develop his or her own thinking if it differs from the master’s thinking? Bowen and Friedman were two brilliant people working with the same theory of human behavior, but with significant differences in focus. Their theory posited differentiation—maintaining a self in relationship with others who are different—as the central variable in growth and maturity. Yet as Friedman moved into his own work and applications of the theory and Bowen moved deeper into science, there was tension. Despite their differences, both made efforts to stay connected, i.e., both worked on differentiation.

23 ———, "Murray and Me."
The complexity of the relationship between Bowen and Friedman continues past their deaths, living on in the relationship of their work and their own “disciples.” Among people who have studied exclusively with Bowen or with Friedman, a tension exists at times as to what is ‘really Bowen theory’ and what is ‘more Friedman.’ Thus, the relationship of their thinking continues to be important as well as challenging.

Larry Foster, a student of both Bowen and Friedman, attempts to capture the relationship of the scientific pioneer and the metaphor man with the idea of a Bowen/Friedman axis. He begins with a list of relationships between Bowen and Friedman:

Teacher/Student

Pioneer/Adventurer

Master/Disciple

Small Town Psychiatrist/Big City Rabbi

Developer of Theory/Applier of Theory

Fact Man/Metaphor Man

Moses/Joshua

Prophet/Sage

Foster suggests that by working outside of the box, i.e., the idea that only Friedman or Bowen can be right, it is possible to open up a new angle on reality. Taking the concept of fact as a verifiable observation and the concept of metaphor as a

---

“continuum from less to more factual connections in which subjectivity can function while remaining open to more objectivity,” Foster suggests that “fact plus metaphor equal reality, or at least a better guess at reality.”

By holding Bowen and Friedman together on an axis rather than succumbing to an either/or position; by holding the intensity of differences together, something new may emerge—perhaps a better understanding of relationship, the human phenomenon, and the world. For this project, I have chosen not to move into an ‘either Bowen/or Friedman’ position. Nor have I collapsed the two into each other. Rather, making use of the idea of the Bowen/Friedman axis, the tensions between the scientist and the rabbi, the fact man and the metaphor man remain. Hopefully, something new will emerge.

**Foundations for a Theory**

Based on “the notion of the human as a phylogenetic development from the lower forms of life,” Bowen assumes that humans as products of evolution are more like other animals and organisms than different from them, and that the same natural processes that regulate the behavior of all other living things significantly regulate human behavior. Further, he assumes that “clinical disorders are a product of that part of man [sic] he has in common with the lower animals.” At the time he was developing the theory Bowen was unique among family therapists and theorists in grounding his understanding of

---

25 Ibid.

human behavior in the broader, natural world. Although the focus of BFST is on families, as pointed out by Friedman, it is “really not about families per se, but about life.” This section lays a foundation for the theoretical concepts through a brief consideration of some basic characteristics of life, the development of complex life, and humans as products of evolution.

Life

Although the question “what is life?” has been and continues to be considered by biologists, chemists, and philosophers, there is no single answer. It is possible, however, to begin with the basic observation that “life moves toward life.” Life seeks life.

Biologists Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan identify three aspects consistent with this observation, and common to life: self-maintenance, reproduction, and evolution. Self-maintenance involves finding and consuming resources from the environment, processing them, and producing waste. Thus, even the simplest forms of life interact with the environment, influencing, being influenced, and in a slightly different way influencing again. Self-maintenance promotes survival. Reproduction, whether an individual cell or a body of cells, involves living matter growing another similar being.

---

27 Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 134.

28 Ibid., 161.

The most abundant and earliest of all living things, microbes or prokaryotic cells, have no nucleus and reproduce by simple division or cloning.\textsuperscript{30} The third aspect common to life is evolution, the phenomenon of continued reproduction by living matter of “altered forms that, in turn, make altered offspring.”\textsuperscript{31} The basis of evolution is the eukaryote cell. In contrast to prokaryotes, eukaryotic cells possess an organized, membrane-bounded nucleus that contains genetic material. In reproduction (sexual reproduction rather than cloning), genetic material of two parents is mixed, and the resulting minor genetic variations produce subtle differences in the offspring cells.\textsuperscript{32} The beginnings of complex life allow evolution.

Evolving Complexity

In the grand scheme of the over fourteen billion-year history of the universe, the earliest forms of life, prokaryotes, appeared less than three billion years ago. Comparatively speaking, eukaryotes are quite new, having burst onto the scene between one and one-half billion years ago. With eukaryotes, life began to be interesting.\textsuperscript{33}

Eukaryotes were the basis of the famous Cambrian explosion during which “patterns of life suddenly burst out into an unprecedented array of complexity and

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{30} Papero, \textit{Bowen Family Systems Theory}, 22.
\bibitem{32} Stephen Webster, \textit{Thinking About Biology} (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
\end{thebibliography}

94
diversity.” How these nucleated cells came to exist is not important to this discussion. What is important is this: eukaryotic cells are the basis of complex life. With sexual reproduction comes difference. With difference comes the potential for complexity.

Friedman describes the increasing complexity and diversity initiated by these cells:

• Eukaryotic cells aggregated to form the first living communities, multicellular organisms.

• Various cells began to differentiate, with a division of labor, and then further aggregated into tissues and organs.

• Multicellular organisms diversified into species and the line of descent that eventually led to mammals, hominids, families, a larger brain, language, and ultimately the forms of colonized protoplasm we call societies, cultures, communities, institutions, and nations.35

Complex organisms are composed of diverse cells that function together for the life of the organism. Bodies are composed of diverse organs that function together for the life of the body. Families are composed of diverse individuals that function together for the life of the family. The basis of increasing complexity is individuals functioning together. Complex life is relational and systemic.

34 Ibid., 114.

35 Friedman, Failure of Nerve, 166.
At each transition to greater complexity, a process occurs that can be called, to use the language of process thought, ‘out of many, one.’ The ‘one’ does not consume the individuality of any of the many parts. As Friedman explains, with increasing complexity, “a mutuality of self-interest arose in which both the smaller unity that had been incorporated and the more complex systems into which it had been incorporated worked for the survival of one another.” However, Friedman continues,

…since the larger unit’s capacity for survival benefited from the richness (variability) it obtained by incorporating the smaller units, life did not violate the integrity of the previous form. At each transition, as more complex forms of togetherness replaced previous forms as the basic entity around which life organized itself, the new forms always preserved the integrity of the previous form so long as the previous form did not do violence to the integrity of its own individuality.36

The complex ‘one’ is a togetherness of many that maintains—to some extent—the individuality of each component of which the ‘one’ is comprised. The term Bowen used to describe the quality of the individual connected to the larger whole is differentiation. Borrowed from biology, the term differentiation is analogous to the process of cell development. Cells develop from essentially the same material, yet they differentiate and specialize to perform separate but related functions in the larger organism.37

From the simplest microbes to the most complex organisms, life seeks life. The aspects of life identified by Margulis and Sagan—self-maintenance, reproduction, and

36 Ibid.

37 Papero, Bowen Family Systems Theory, 47.
evolution—describe life at all levels. Likewise, all levels of life are marked by the interactive and mutually influential relationships of organisms with their environments. In complex forms of life, the interaction and mutual influence is both internal, between cells and organs, and external, in relationship to the environment.

It is important to clarify the importance of these aspects of life in relationship to BFST. Bowen used the term *emotional system* to describe automatic instinctual behaviors that govern the *dance of life*, i.e., behaviors that are about life seeking life.\(^{38}\)

Self-maintenance, reproduction, and evolution, as well as interaction, mutual influence, and all mechanisms contributing to survival, govern the behavior of life from the simplest cell to the most complex organism. Humans, as products of evolution, have the same automatic life-seeking behaviors and responses that are present in all other forms of life. Despite the presence of the pre-frontal lobes in the brain of humans, and human consciousness, BFST posits much human behavior is driven by the emotional system. Although recognition of the impact of the emotional system on human functioning is challenging, it opens a new way to think about human problems, and a new way to help.

**Humans as Products of Evolution**

As discussed above, BFST is built on the assumption that humans, as products of evolution, are more like other animals than different from them.\(^{39}\) There are, however,

---

\(^{38}\) Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 305.

\(^{39}\) Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 3.
obvious differences between *Homo sapiens* and other animals, the most significant of which is the size of the brain, and the prefrontal cortex.\textsuperscript{40}

*The Triune Brain*

Both Bowen and Michael Kerr, the current Director of the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, draw on the theory of the brain developed by neuroscientist Paul MacLean. According to MacLean, in its evolution the human brain has expanded along the lines of three basic formations that “reflect an ancestral relationship, respectively, to reptiles, early mammals, and late mammals.”\textsuperscript{41}

The oldest part of the brain, the protoreptilian formation or R-complex, is located in a large fist of ganglia at the base of the human forebrain. Chemically and structurally, it is similar to the brain of a reptile. One can gain a sense of this part of the brain by observing the behavior of a reptile. Reptiles are very sensitive and reactive to their environment, and have automatic protective responses. They are territorial. Behaviors


\textsuperscript{41} Paul D. MacLean, *The Triune Brain in Evolution* (New York: Plenum Press, 1990), 9. The lack of interest on the part of mainstream academic neuroscience in much of MacLean’s work has been attributed in part to an inaccurate review in *Science* (Oct 12, 1990) of his landmark work, *The Triune Brain in Evolution: Role in Paleocerebral Functions* (1990), and in part to differences of emphasis in study of the brain. MacLean’s interest is in the larger questions of human life and the brain as the biological substrate of behaviors that are seemingly irrational. The focus of much contemporary neuroscience is on more focused, technical aspects. Although MacLean’s theory of the triune brain first was presented in the 1960s and 1970s, and “may be wrong in some of its particulars, right in others, but still be very useful and valid in its more general features,” a number of neuroscientists believe it remains important in contemporary evolutionary psychology. See Jr. Gerald A. Cory, "Reappraising Maclean's Triune Brain Concept," in *The Evolutionary Neuroethology of Paul Maclean: Convergences and Frontiers*, ed. Jr. Gerald A. Cory and Jr. Russell Gardner (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 11.
that humans share with reptiles include automatic, reactive responses related to survival, reproduction, and territory. Unlike mammals however, reptiles are not relational. They do not nurture their young; rather, at times they eat them.

The second oldest formation of the brain came with the evolution of mammals. Three behavioral advances are present in mammals: (1) nursing in conjunction with maternal care, (2) vocalization in the service of maintaining maternal-offspring contact, and (3) playfulness. MacLean demonstrates the involvement of the limbic system in these behaviors. One can gain a sense of this part of the brain by thinking about which creature makes a better playmate for a human—a lizard, or a dog?

The most recent evolutionary formation of the human brain includes the prefrontal cortex. As Kerr writes, “in the evolution from Neanderthal to Cro-Magnon man, the human forehead developed from a low brow to a high brow. The prefrontal cortex lies beneath this heightened brow.” Unique to humans, the prefrontal cortex has been identified as playing the central role in many human activities, including the capacity for abstract thinking, foresight, goal-setting, and decision-making. Somewhat surprisingly, the prefrontal cortex does not play a significant role in intelligence. This is the only part of the brain that looks toward an inner world. The prefrontal cortex is

---

42 MacLean, *The Triune Brain in Evolution*, 16.


99
involved in consciousness, described by Damasio as “the unified mental pattern that brings together the object and the self.”

Perhaps, as Kerr speculates,

…it is the prefrontal cortex that makes human beings truly unique. Are we the only animal capable of observing its internal emotional, feeling, and subjective states and, as a consequence, the only animal capable of some degree of choice about the influence of those states on its actions and inactions?

Although the triune human brain has expanded to a great size, MacLean posits it has retained the basic features of its ancestral relationship to reptiles, early mammals, and recent mammals. Thus, even with the evolution of the neocortex and prefrontal lobes, the human brain has much in common with the brains of reptiles and earlier mammals. Furthermore, the presence of pre-frontal lobes does not automatically override the impulses of the protoreptilian and mammalian brains. Automatic responses are part of everyday life for *Homo sapiens*. The difference between mammals and humans is that humans have some capacity to choose the degree to which automatic responses govern behavior. MacLean’s work parallels Bowen’s assumption that the behaviors of humans and other animals have much in common.

---


47 Ibid., 34-38.
Three Systems and the Brain

As noted earlier, Bowen uses the term emotional system to describe the automatic and instinctual behaviors and processes that are common to all life. In the broadest sense, the emotional system can be said to “govern the ‘dance of life’ in all living things.”\(^{48}\) Bowen and Kerr suggest that the emotional system is roughly correlative with (although not synonymous to) the R-complex—the reptilian brain—that governs automatic behavior.

Bowen Family Systems Theory conceptualizes two additional systems that are influential in human functioning and behavior: the feeling system, and the intellectual system.\(^ {49}\) These systems are fairly recent acquisitions in the evolutionary line of \textit{Homo sapiens}, and again, are roughly correlative with the brain formations described by MacLean as mammalian and human.\(^ {50}\) Before describing these two systems, however, it is important to note that although the term \textit{emotion} is central in BFST, the theory’s use of the term is somewhat unusual. In BFST, emotion refers to the deeper, automatic, and instinctual processes that lie below the level of conscious awareness. A \textit{feeling}, as described by Bowen, is “the derivative of a deeper emotional state as it is registered on a screen within in the intellectual system.”\(^ {51}\)

\(^{48}\) Bowen, \textit{Family Therapy in Clinical Practice}, 305.


\(^{50}\) Kerr and Bowen, \textit{Family Evaluation}, 30-33.

\(^{51}\) Bowen, \textit{Family Therapy in Clinical Practice}, 305.
The feeling system, as described by Kerr, “is undeniably quite influential in human activity. In fact, feelings probably have greater influence on the social process than thinking.” Quoting Kerr again,

People feel guilt, shame, disapproval, anger, anxiety, jealousy, ecstasy, sympathy, rejection, etc. Many other animals frequently act as if they experience similar feelings, but there is little evidence that many of them do. They are simply reacting emotionally. The assumption is that humans are reacting emotionally too, but with a layer of feeling on top of it. It is the feeling component that we are aware of, but there is more to the reaction than just feelings.  

The most recently acquired part of the human nervous system is the intellectual system, or the thinking brain (also described as the executive functions), which is correlative to the pre-frontal lobes. This system includes the capacity to know, understand, communicate, and to observe and abstract the processes of the natural world. It is this system in the brain that is central to ability of humans to intentionally work on differentiation of self. It is important to remember, however, that all systems are deeply inter-related and inseparable.

Anxiety And Four Central Concepts

Bowen Family Systems Theory is comprised of eight concepts with which it is possible to offer a coherent story of a particular family’s functioning across time. This

---


53 Kerr and Bowen, Family Evaluation, 37.

54 Papero, Bowen Family Systems Theory, 45.
presentation of the theory follows Friedman’s outline of “four major interlocking concepts that underlie all other ideas of BST, and that differentiate Bowen theory from other family theories: the emotional system, multigenerational transmission, emotional triangles, and differentiation of self. 55 These concepts, plus the concept of emotional process in society, are the most relevant elements of BFST to this project. The concepts all are interdependent and cannot be understood in isolation from each other. In addition, they all are held together by a “premise that subsumes the entire theory, that there is chronic anxiety in all of life that comes with the territory of living.” 56

Anxiety

According to BFST, two primary variables influence the functioning of organisms, whether individuals or families or societies: chronic anxiety and differentiation of self. In Bowen’s thinking, anxiety is more than a general feeling of worry or nervousness. It is not synonymous with philosophical uses for the term, such as Tillich’s existential angst produced by ontological questions of being and non-being. 57 Rather, anxiety is a biological phenomenon common to all life and is related closely to what Hans Selye identifies as stress: “the nonspecific response of the body to any

---

55 Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 139.
56 Ibid., 139.
demand made upon it.” Anxiety is a physiological phenomenon, i.e., a basic survival mechanism that prepares an organism to fight, flee, or freeze in response to threat. There is an optimal level of anxiety or reactivity that maintains an organism’s physiological and psychological balance. Too little, and the organism is dead. Too much, and the organism is unable to function. Although emotional, physiological and psychological reactivity may be manifested at different levels and in different ways, Kerr believes that they are pretty much the same thing.  

Bowen theory distinguishes between two kinds of anxiety: acute and chronic. Acute anxiety—response to a real threat—is specific and time-limited. Once the threat is met or dissipates, it disappears, the physiological response subsides, and the system’s balance is restored. In contrast, chronic anxiety—response to anticipated or imagined threat—is experienced as unending. The physiological response continues and the system’s balance remains tenuous. Simply described, acute anxiety is fed by fear of what is; chronic anxiety, by fear of what may be. While individuals and families usually adapt successfully to acute anxiety, chronic anxiety can strain or exceed their ability to cope and lead to symptoms.

---


59 Michael E. Kerr, "Anxiety" (paper presented at the Special Postgraduate Program, Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, December 7 2005).
Although it is present in all life, chronic anxiety, i.e., fear of what may be, increases with the capacities of the human prefrontal cortex to observe and abstract processes of the natural world, and the capacity to project into the future. Neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky illustrates the physiological anxiety or stress response of a zebra being stalked by a lion and the way in which the response subsides once the threat has passed. He then points out that for humans, psychological and social stressors trigger the very same physiological responses.\(^6^0\) He writes,

> Essentially, we humans live well enough and long enough, and are smart enough, to generate all sorts of stressful events purely in our heads. How many hippos worry about whether Social Security is going to last as long as they will, or even what they are going to say on a first date?\(^6^1\)

To phrase the question in a format relevant to this project, how many hippos get nervous with the arrival of a new pastor, or worry about receiving the sacrament from a worship assistant in a same-sex relationship?

Kerr believes that chronic anxiety is related primarily to threats generated in and by emotionally significant relationships in which an individual “is affected on an emotional, feeling, and subjective level by what another person thinks, feels, says, and does, or by what is imagined another person thinks, feels, says, and does.”\(^6^2\) Thus, chronic anxiety is related to the degree of fusion in the family. Where fusion is tight and


\(^6^1\)Ibid., 5-6.

\(^6^2\)Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 64.
togetherness needs are strong, sensitivity to attention, approval, expectations, and distress is greater. Small shifts in any of these factors are more likely to be perceived as threatening, and thus contribute to higher levels of chronic anxiety, a fear of what may be. Where the fusion is less tight and togetherness needs are less intense, sensitivity to attention, approval, expectations and distress is lower, and tolerance for differences is greater.

Although many things influence it, chronic anxiety is not caused by any one thing. Once triggered, however, a process of actions and reactions provides a momentum that is largely independent of the initial event. Most often, it is not the initial event that overwhelms people, but the aftermath of the event, i.e., the relationship processes set in motion by the event. High levels of anxiety are uncomfortable and threaten to upset the balance of the system. Thus, automatic responses kick in to alleviate and/or cope with the anxiety. Almost any behavior, substance, or relationship can become a coping mechanism that is helpful in managing discomfort, lowering anxiety, and restoring some level of balance. When coping mechanisms are over-used, however, they can become problematic and may themselves lead to the development of mental, social, and/or physiological symptoms.

63 According to Kerr, “real or anticipated events, such as retirement or a child’s leaving home, may initially disturb or threaten the balance of a family system, but once the balance is disturbed, chronic anxiety is propagated more by people’s reactions to the disturbance than by reactions to the event itself.” Kerr, "Chronic Anxiety and Defining a Self," 47.
The way Friedman thinks about chronic anxiety within the context of families and all of life bears noting. He describes chronic anxiety as

…the emotional and physical reactivity shared by all protoplasm, the responses that are automatic rather than mediated by the cortex. It is transmitted from previous generations by families both cumulatively and idiosyncratically, and is experienced and expressed more intensely by various members of our species because of the ways previous generations in their families have channeled the transmission of their own.64

Anxiety spreads automatically through families, organizations, and societies. Just as it is a major variable in the development of symptoms in families, it is a major variable in the development of difficulties in broader organizations and societies. The generalized ‘fear of what may be’ has tremendous potential to inhibit functioning and to narrow the range of responses available to meet challenges and change.

The Emotional System

The first of the interlocking concepts of BFST described by Friedman is the emotional system. This concept describes the automatic, instinctual behaviors that govern the dance of life, and is loosely connected to the R-complex or reptilian brain. The term emotional system also is used to describe a relationship group or field. Because it is used in two somewhat different ways, at times this term is confusing. Friedman uses the term to refer to:

64 Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 140.
…any group of people or other colonized forms of protoplasm (herds, flocks, troops, packs, schools, swarms, and aggregates) that have developed emotional interdependencies to the point where the resulting system through which the parts are connected (administratively, physically, or emotionally) has evolved its own principles of organization. The structure, or resulting field, therefore, tends to influence the functioning of the various members more than any of the components tend to influence the functioning of the system.65

Friedman’s description identifies the emotional system as a group, or a field—similar to a magnetic or gravitational field. The field or system drives the behavior, but from Friedman’s perspective it appears to be exterior to the individual. In contrast, Bowen’s description of the emotional system as instinctual, automatic processes suggests that it is located within an individual or organism.

Although it appears Bowen and Friedman are describing two different things, Friedman’s description of the family emotional system offers some clarification. Because it elucidates aspects of family that are applicable to congregations, I quote it at length. A family emotional system, he writes,

…includes the members’ thoughts, feelings, emotions, fantasies, associations, and past connections, individually and together. It includes their physical makeup, genetic heritage, and current metabolic states. It involves their sibling position and their parents’ sibling positions. It rotates on the axes of their respective paths within the multigenerational processes transmitted from their own families of origin, including the fusion and the cutoffs. It includes the emotional history of the system itself, particularly the conditions under which it originally took shape; the effect upon it of larger emotional and physical forces, how it has dealt with transitions, particularly loss, and the quality of differentiation in the system, both

---

65 Ibid., 144.
now and in the past, particularly of those at the top. In effect, it includes all the information that can be put on a family’s genogram.66

Thus, I understand the emotional system to be both internal and external to the organism, and to be co-created. Automatic behaviors are shaped by instincts that are internal to all of life, as in automatic survival and life-seeking mechanisms. However, automatic behaviors—those that happen without conscious thought and/or volition—also are shaped by the emotional field in which an individual lives and functions. As Kerr describes it, the emotional system includes “all of an organism’s mechanisms for driving and guiding it through life,” those processes that predate the development of the human’s complex cerebral cortex, and those processes that develop in response and reaction to life experiences, challenges, and relationships.67

By way of illustration, imagine a family that has experienced the death of a young child through random violence. Family members have heightened sensitivity to threats or perceived threats against children or against any person. They are chronically anxious about anything that seems threatening. Their reactions are neither thoughtful nor willed, but affect their overall functioning in significant ways. Surviving siblings will carry those sensitivities and their accompanying anxiety into adulthood. As they reproduce and their children grow, when there is a perception of threat, the increase in anxiety will have

66 Ibid. A genogram is a diagram used to track information about each member of a family and relationships between family members. See also, Monica McGoldrick, Randy Gerson, and Sylvia Shellenberger, Genograms: Assessment and Interventions, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).
67 Kerr and Bowen, Family Evaluation, 28.
to be managed in some way. Similarly, anxiety (and in many cases, highly protective measures) increases when their offspring reach the age at which their sibling died, and in situations similar to that surrounding their sibling’s death. It is likely that individuals born generations after the initial trauma will, in some way, be impacted by this loss—even if they have never heard the story. The automatic reactivity or chronic anxiety is passed down through the generations, and becomes one of the factors driving the organism that is this family through life.

*Individuality and Togetherness*

Bowen Theory posits an emotional system governed by two life forces: individuality and togetherness. Any complex organism is comprised of multiple individual cells functioning together. A *force for togetherness* appears to be a part of life. Any complex organism is comprised of multiple *individual* cells functioning together. A *force for individuality* also appears to be a part of life. In fact one cannot exist without the other. As described by Kerr, the force for individuality, rooted in biology, “propels an organism to follow its own directives, to be an independent and distinct entity.” The force for togetherness, also rooted in biology, “propels an organism to follow the directives of others, to be a dependent, connected, and indistinct entity.”

---

68 Ibid., 64-65. In BFST, *biology* “includes all the forces that govern evolution and natural systems.” The assumption is that naturally occurring processes with “roots that extended far deeper into the history of life than just human evolution” continue to shape human behavior. ———, *Family Evaluation*, 235.
The togetherness force described in BFST is commonly misunderstood. Even Kerr admits to having shifted somewhat in his understanding since the 1988 publication of *Family Evaluation*. Currently, he describes the individuality force as differentiation, and the togetherness force as fusion. Thus, these are not equal forces to be balanced. Rather, differentiation, i.e., responding to the force for individuality, is a move toward greater health, while fusion, i.e., a response to the force for togetherness, is less optimal. Given this understanding, it is important to clarify a misconception that often arises: that BFST is ‘anti-togetherness.’ In my opinion, this misconception grows from misunderstandings of the theory.

In contrast to many understandings of human behavior, BFST begins with the assumption that relationship, i.e., togetherness, is a fact of life that cannot be escaped. Any assumption one might have of being immune to relationships makes as much sense as a single cell assuming it can function independently of the larger organ or body. The force for togetherness simply is a fact of life. (This is demonstrated beautifully in Whitehead’s process metaphysics, presented in Chapter 5.) As Kerr describes it, “when people have a limited capacity to be individuals, they are vulnerable to the emotional interplay of relationships. They can easily feel smothered or abandoned in a relationship and over-react to the emotional needs of others.”

---

69 Kerr noted this in a personal conversation at a conference in April, 2010.

being smothered by togetherness cut off from relationships, this is not a move toward differentiation, but is the flip side of fusion, i.e. a reaction to the togetherness force. Bowen’s concept of *emotional cutoff* describes this phenomenon. 

Similarly, when individuals feel abandoned are unable to function outside of relationships, it too much togetherness force and too little force for differentiation. In either case, the strength of the togetherness force overwhelms the force for differentiation. What is crucial to remember is that differentiation is always in the context of relationships. Any efforts toward differentiating that are not done within relationship are reactive responses to the togetherness force, not mature moves toward self in relationship.

Individuality and togetherness are necessary forces within the phenomenon of evolving life. Examples are visible at all levels of life, from the interdependence of parts and systems of any organism including the human body, to ant colonies, to primate colonies, to families, to any groups in which individuals are important to each other. 

A German fable cited by sociobiologist E. O. Wilson offers a playful description of this phenomenon:

One very cold night a group of porcupines were huddled together for warmth. However, their spines made proximity uncomfortable, so they moved apart again

---

71 Cutoff and distance are synonymous. However, in the 1970s emotional cutoff was made a separate theoretical concept to “emphasize its importance for explaining the intensity of the emotional process in a nuclear family… Reducing emotional cutoff from the past is one of the most important elements of therapy.” Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 271n.

and got cold. After shuffling repeatedly in and out, they eventually found a
distance at which they could still be comfortably warm without getting pricked.
This distance they henceforth called decency and good manners.\textsuperscript{73}

The distance considered ‘decency and good manners’ varies between and within
mammalian species. It also varies between families, and between congregations.
Managing to maintain self (individuality), while in relationship (togetherness), is a
natural process that enhances survival and continued evolution, but sometimes, as with
the porcupines, feels a little prickly.

\textit{Emotional Process}

The term \textit{emotional process} is used often in BFST, but seldom is it explained. In
a footnote, Kerr writes that “process”

\ldots refers to a continuous series of actions or changes that result in a given set of
circumstances or phenomena; the term “content” refers to the circumstances or
phenomena out of the context of those actions or changes. It is analogous to a
movie being equivalent to process and the individual frame of the movie being
equivalent to content.\textsuperscript{74}

Emotional process refers to ways in which people, families, and systems manage
anxiety and the challenges of life. Emotional chain reactions are continuous and go on
between all components of a system simultaneously. When one is caught up in the
emotional process, or if the system is very calm, it is difficult to see these chain reactions.

\textsuperscript{73} Kerr and Bowen, \textit{Family Evaluation}, 52. Edward O. Wilson, \textit{Sociobiology: The New Synthesis}

\textsuperscript{74} Kerr and Bowen, \textit{Family Evaluation}, 14 n.
However, if one is able to maintain a little separation when the system becomes more anxious and not be caught up completely, the emotional process becomes more visible.

The concept of nuclear family emotional process describes particular processes used in nuclear families to manage anxiety. The most common is distancing.\textsuperscript{75} Three additional relationship patterns are common in families: disproportionate adaptation by one partner to another to preserve harmony (also described as reciprocal overfunctioning and underfunctioning), conflict, and the focus of parental anxiety on a child.\textsuperscript{76}

Emotional distance allows some emotional insulation from people’s impact on one another. Whether achieved through physical or internal withdrawal, the anxiety lessens. It is discernible in people’s avoidance of one another, as well as avoidance of

\textsuperscript{75} Kerr does not identify emotional distancing as a unique relationship pattern of nuclear family emotional process, because it is a feature of all significant relationships and is interwoven with all the nuclear family patterns of emotional functioning. Managing anxiety and undifferentiation with emotional distancing is automatic. Distancing may be external, e.g., a couple manages to spend little time together, and when they are geographically close, the presence of others allows them to stay distant. Distancing may be internal as well. It is possible to “tune out” another quite effectively, and to give signals that indicate that one is not available for interactions. Avoidance of contact in a relationship—whether physical or emotional—does not mean the pair is not thinking about each other. Often, critical thoughts about the other are intense and constant. Distancing is automatic, and often below the level of awareness. When distancing itself increases the level of discomfort, triangles may be created. Although people generally view the other as the cause of their discomfort and distancing, according to Papero, “what people are actually avoiding is their own discomfort or reactivity to another.” Papero, Bowen Family Systems Theory, 53.

\textsuperscript{76} Kerr and Bowen, Family Evaluation, 255. There are differences between Bowen and some of the major interpreters of the theory in the presentation of this concept, including the formal name of the concept, and ways in which the relationship patterns are described. Bowen, Kerr and Gilbert name the concept nuclear family emotional system, while Papero prefers nuclear family emotional process. To alleviate some of the confusion that develops between the emotional system and the nuclear family emotional system, I draw on Papero’s identification of the concept as nuclear family emotional process. However, I use Kerr’s descriptions of the different relationship patterns.
subjects that may cause distress. Some level of stability and comfort are gained with distance, but at the loss of comfort gained through togetherness.\(^77\)

Another response to heightened anxiety and imbalances in the relationship system involves making accommodations that will relieve the other’s anxiety and maintain harmony. Kerr explains that this response

\[\ldots\text{requires that each person give up a little of his individuality or ‘self’ to mold himself [or herself] to the wishes of the other. The result can be viewed as an emotional trade-off, the threat to togetherness needs is temporarily removed at the price of giving up some individuality.}\(^78\]

One person in the relationship often is more adaptive than the other, giving up self to maintain harmony. In these situations the spouse who adapts becomes a functional no-self. With long-term use of this pattern, according to Bowen, “the adaptive one is vulnerable to some kind of chronic dysfunction, which can be physical illness, emotional illness, or a social dysfunction such as drinking, the use of drugs, or irresponsible behavior.”\(^79\)

In conflictual relationships, neither partner gives in to the other. There is constant pressure on one another to think and do things their own way, but the pressure is met with resistance and sometimes rebellion. The less self an individual has, the more threatening it is to go along with the other. Each, to an extent, attempts to control how the other

\(^{77}\) Ibid., 81.

\(^{78}\) Ibid., 81.

\(^{79}\) Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 263.
thinks and acts, and simultaneously fights against the other’s attempts to control or influence him or her. When conflict is the primary means of managing anxiety, the conflictual relationship is the symptom.\footnote{Kerr and Bowen, \textit{Family Evaluation}, 82-83.}

The final common pattern of nuclear family emotional process is projection of anxiety onto a child. Focus of attention on a child, whether positive or negative, can calm tensions in the parental relationship. The focus can be in relationship to high achievement on the part of a child, to illness, or to behavioral difficulties.

The particular pattern or patterns that develop in a nuclear family are learned in the family of origin of each spouse. Children learn to adapt to and participate in the relationship processes of their families, and when older, tend to select partners with whom they can replicate the more influential aspects of the relationship processes that existed in the original family. The patterns operate in all configurations of the nuclear family, whether two-parent, single-parent, step-parent, heterosexual, or homosexual, and the intensity of the patterns is related to the level of differentiation (and undifferentiation) of the family, the level of chronic anxiety, and the intensity of stressors experienced by the family.\footnote{Ibid., 222.}

By way of illustration, consider again the family that experienced the death of a child by random violence. Increased levels of chronic anxiety generated by the fear of

\footnote{Kerr and Bowen, \textit{Family Evaluation}, 82-83.}
\footnote{Ibid., 222.}
threat must be managed in some way. The parents might manage the anxiety by distancing from each other. In addition to physical and emotional distance, coping mechanisms such as excessive use of substances and outside relationships (triangles) are ways of distancing. Or, the parents might engage each other in conflict. Or again, one of the parents might overfunction by continually adapting self in order to reduce the discomfort of the other. Adapting in such a way as to absorb a great portion of the system’s anxiety often leads to symptoms in the adaptive individual. Anxiety might also be managed by focusing on a surviving child, e.g., by excessive concern about that child’s safety, and/or functioning. A child in the focused position may develop symptoms, and subsequent focus on the health and wellbeing of the child serves to lessen anxiety in the parental relationship. Any number of family issues, from intense conflict, to affairs, to substance abuse, to depression, to children acting out can be seen as ways of managing anxiety.

These coping mechanisms are not pathological. The just are. In situations of high anxiety, however, overuse of a coping mechanism can lead to symptoms. For example, use of alcohol to relax can be fine, but when it is over-used, it becomes problematic. Or, distancing can be fine as well. It offers an opportunity to regroup. However, when it goes on too long and the primary relationship is avoided, or when it leads to emotional cutoff, it becomes problematic.
Multigenerational Transmission Process

Although not the core concept of BFST, the *multigenerational transmission process* is probably the most widely known concept of the theory. This concept moves beyond the identification of the *influence* of the past on the present, to suggest that the past actually is *in the present*. The emotional processes of the nuclear family are similar to those present in the multigenerational families of marital partners, and are passed down from generation to generation. More than that, the emotional processes common to life in general are present in current life. As described by Friedman,

… emotional responses, both in their nature and the degree of their intensity, are passed down from ‘generation to generation,’ a triple entendre that means not only (1) parents to children, but also (2) the replication from any consecutive stages of reproduction, and (3) the overall process itself.\(^\text{82}\)

During the early sessions with any client, Bowen-trained therapists give great attention to the multigenerational history of the family. Information about the family of origin of each spouse is gathered and used to develop a family diagram or *genogram*. Although these diagrams resemble genealogical charts, they differ in that the details are used to identify the multigenerational emotional process in the family. Clients are asked to research and provide detailed information about family members and nuclear family units going back at least three generations. Information gathered includes:

\(^\text{82}\) Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 147.
dates of birth, marriage, divorce, birth of children, moves, serious illnesses, deaths; education levels, careers, and employment history;

• symptoms, including physical, mental, and social problems; cause of death;

• relationship issues, including relationships between an individual and his or her family of origin, and his or her parents and their families of origin, etc.83

Study of this factual information assists in identification of the emotional processes in the extended family system. By considering one’s self in the context of the multigenerational emotional process, it is possible to be more objective and neutral about the family as a whole and to work on developing different patterns of response to challenges. Ultimately, study of the multigenerational transmission process allows one to identify ways the emotional system shapes one’s own reactions and ways one can work on differentiation of self.84

Differentiation of Self

The cornerstone of Bowen theory, differentiation of self, describes two distinct but closely interrelated processes: one that occurs within the individual, and the other that describes how individuals function in relationships. These parallel the ways in which the emotional system is understood as being both internal and external.

83 Kerr and Bowen, Family Evaluation, 290-306.

84 Bowen, Family Therapy in Clinical Practice, 529-47.
Internal to an individual, differentiation describes the person’s capacity to, as Kerr describes it, “to be aware of the difference between their intellectually determined and their emotionally determined functioning, and to have some choice about the degree to which each type of functioning governs their behavior.”

Thinking in terms of a continuum, individuals with higher levels of differentiation have greater capacity to stand in the midst of an anxious situation and maintain clarity of thinking. They are clearer about their own thinking and beliefs, and better able to maintain relationships in the face of differences. Their lower levels of chronic anxiety allow them to be more flexible and adaptive to challenges and change.

Less awareness of differences between intellectually and emotionally determined functioning at lower levels of differentiation means that individuals are less thoughtful and more reactive. As anxiety increases there is less capacity to see the larger picture and to respond from personal thinking and beliefs. Higher levels of chronic anxiety inhibit their flexibility and capacity to adapt to challenge and change. Individuals and families at lower levels of differentiation generally experience more symptoms and difficulties in life.

Externally, differentiation describes the way individuals function in relationships. Specifically, it refers to variations between individuals in the capacity to maintain a self

---


86 Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 101-03.
in a relationship system. Individuals at higher levels of differentiation are able to be
different in relationship, and to allow others to be different as well. The togetherness
force is less strong, and although individuals are aware of the attention, approval,
expectations, and distress of people who are important to them, their thinking, feeling,
and behavior is not determined automatically by these things. Nor do they seek to
determine the thinking, feeling, and behavior of others. Individuals with higher levels of
differentiation are freer to set and pursue their own life goals, and to be in close
relationships as well.\(^\text{87}\)

Individuals at lower levels of differentiation have less capacity to maintain a self
in relationship. At lower levels of differentiation, the togetherness force is stronger. This
translates into higher levels of sensitivity to the attention, approval, expectations and
distress of important people, which means that an individual’s thinking, feeling, and
behavior is shaped more by relationships than by the individual’s thoughtful choices. As
the strength of the togetherness force increases and the level of differentiation decreases,
the capacity to be different-together decreases and differences become more threatening.
Although the emotional processes described above are present in every family, in families
with lower levels of differentiation the comfortable balance of the system is upset more
easily, and use of coping mechanisms is more automatic.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 103-07.
As noted earlier, Bowen drew the term differentiation from biology, where it is used to describe the process by which a less specialized cell becomes more specialized. It involves both separation and specialization. As Friedman describes this process, “cells can have no identity, purpose, or distinctiveness until they have separated from—that is, left—their progenitors.” It is important to clarify that complete separation is not the goal. He continues,

…also implicit in this biological metaphor or homologue is the idea that such self has little meaning if the cell cannot connect. In its simplest terms, therefore, differentiation is the capacity to be one’s own integrated aggregate-of-cells person while still belonging to, or being able to relate to, a larger colony.  

Differentiation of cells is homologous (sharing similar evolutionary pathways) to human development. During pregnancy and infancy, there is a symbiosis between mother (or caretaker) and child. The human infant is completely dependent on someone else for survival, and developmentally has no awareness of self as a separate being. The biological force for togetherness is primary. Healthy development involves decreasing dependency and increasingly developing one’s own identity, purpose, and ability to be responsible for oneself. Here we see the biological force for individuality in play. Self, however, continues to relate to the wider family system. Just as an individual cell in a human body is embedded in the larger whole and cannot function separately, an

---

88 Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 141.
individual person is embedded in the larger relationship system, and separation from the larger whole impacts severely the possibility for healthy functioning and even survival.  

Friedman’s descriptions of differentiation, somewhat less abstract than what has been offered to this point, are helpful in terms of specific behaviors. Friedman writes, differentiation is:

- The capacity to take a stand in an intense emotional system.
- Saying “I” when others are demanding “we.”
- Containing one’s reactivity to the reactivity of others, which includes the ability to avoid being polarized.
- Maintaining a non-anxious presence in the face of anxious others.
- Knowing where one ends and another begins.
- Being able to cease automatically being one of the system’s emotional dominoes.
- Being clear about one’s own personal values and goals.
- Taking maximum responsibility for one’s own emotional being and destiny rather than blaming others or the context.

It is important to note that differentiation of self does not preclude feeling. Part of life, feelings are not to be dismissed or belittled. The concept of differentiation of self

89 Kerr and Bowen, Family Evaluation, 94-95.
90 Friedman, Failure of Nerve, 182.
posits that it is possible, and preferable, to maintain some amount of choice as to whether one’s thinking, feeling, and acting are going to be guided solely by feelings and the deeper emotional system, without the benefit of the executive functions of the brain that permit greater objectivity and assessment of consequences of actions. Although contemporary brain research suggests that it is impossible to function only out of the intellectual system, (and if possible, it would be undesirable), to a degree, it is possible to counteract emotional intensity. It also is important to clarify that differentiation is not synonymous with intellect. Even the most intelligent people can be poorly differentiated and use their intellect in service of emotional reactivity.

There are differences between basic and functional levels of differentiation that make it difficult to place people at specific points on the scale of differentiation. The basic level of differentiation, established fairly early in life in the context of the nuclear family emotional system, is solid and impervious to changes in relationship. According to Papero, the basic level of differentiation of self,

…is manifested in the degree to which an individual manages across life to keep thinking and emotional systems separate, to retain choice between behavior governed by thinking and by emotional reactivity and to set a life course based on carefully thought out principles and goals.

---

91 Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 176.
92 Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*.
In contrast, the functional level of differentiation is determined by fluctuations in anxiety and in response to relationship variables.

When calm, a person may function with a thoughtful approach to life. In the crucible of an intense personal relationship, however, calm thought and self-direction are eroded and life course comes to conform with the demands of the relationship.\textsuperscript{94}

Although members of a nuclear family are thought to have similar levels of differentiation, there may small variations between siblings. These variations are related to the degree to which the child is caught up in the emotional process of the family, and the degree to which he or she functions to manage the anxiety. In particular, they are related to the \textit{functional position} of the child in the parental triangle, which is explained below.\textsuperscript{95}

For example, a first child born to parents who are geographically and emotionally distant from extended family and friends, and whose father manages anxiety with distancing, may function to calm and cheer her mother. To a degree, the mother’s wellbeing comes to be tied to the behavior of the child, and the child becomes highly sensitive to the mother’s mood. When the mother seems distant and in distress, the child becomes anxious and adjusts her behavior to calm and cheer her. Resolution of the mother-child symbiosis is delayed, and this particular child’s heightened sensitivity to the attention, approval, expectations, and distress of mother eventually is replayed in

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 48.

\textsuperscript{95} Kerr and Bowen, \textit{Family Evaluation}, 193-94.
relationships with other emotionally significant individuals. The way in which the first child functions in relationship with the mother continues with the birth of the second child. The functioning of the first child in relationship to mother, however, allows the younger child to be less caught up and a little freer to make his or her own choices. The degree to which a child is caught up in the anxiety of the larger family unit may be related to multigenerational patterns, events occurring in the family around the time of the child’s birth, and any number of different factors.

Differentiation is not a final goal to be attained. Rather, it “is the lifelong process of striving to keep one’s being in balance through the reciprocal external and internal processes of self-definition and self-regulation,” and the hope that one can do it just a little better over time. Differentiation of self includes respect for the *self* of others. Willing others to be and/or do something is not part of the process. The relationship of willing and self-regulation is discussed further in Chapter 4.

Differentiation is not to be equated with similar sounding ideas, such as autonomy, individuation, or independence. It is not achieved through distance or cutting oneself off from the family, but only in the context of relationships with emotionally significant others. Thus, one does not differentiate *from* one’s family of origin, but works on differentiation *in* one’s family. As Kerr says, “differentiation is a

---

96 Friedman, “Bowen Therapy and Theory,” 140.
97 Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, 183.
98 Ibid., 184.
product of a way of thinking that translates into a way of being." It has to do with one’s integrity—with one’s carefully thought out beliefs and principles, and efforts to live according to them.

Small changes in the basic level of differentiation can be attained through disciplined efforts at understanding the emotional process in one’s multigenerational family while simultaneously working on one’s self-definition, and self-regulation. Although the changes are small, they have the potential to impact positively one’s self and the functioning of the larger emotional systems of which one is a part.

Emotional Triangles

As Bowen moved from psychoanalytic to systems thinking, he shifted his focus from the individual, to the mother-child dyad, to the mother, father, and child triad, and to the family as an emotional unit. In contrast to the individual focus of psychoanalytic theory, and the dyadic focus of attachment and object-relations theories, in Bowen theory relationships of triads are the central focus and key to seeing emotional process in the relationship system. Bowen explains the concept of the emotional triangle as follows: “[T]he triangle, a three-person emotional configuration, is the molecule or basic building

---


100 Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 140-42.
block of any emotional system, whether it is in the family or any other group." The triangle allows observation of the facts of functioning in human relationships—what and when and where and how. Assignment of motive—why—is not part of the concept. Observation of triangles requires standing back and watching them unfold.

Anxiety is the major influence on the basic processes in triangles. When anxiety is low, a two-person relationship can be calm and comfortable. It is inevitable, however, that emotional forces within the relationship, or from outside it, will disturb the equilibrium, raise the anxiety level, and cause discomfort. When a third person becomes involved in the tension of the dyad, a triangle is created. Addition of a third person to the dyadic relationship decreases anxiety by allowing it to spread between three relationships rather than two. With this there is increased flexibility and adaptability in the system’s response to anxiety and challenge.

It is important to note, however, that triangles also may serve to increase anxiety in a system. The difference is related to the response of the third person in the triangle. Friedman compares the responses of individuals to anxiety to electrical transformers that

101 Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 373. Bowen was not satisfied with the choice of the term triangle, writing, “If I had it to do over again, I probably would have found another term, but I still do not know what it would be… When I began thinking ‘triangles,’ I was thinking of emotional flow and counter-flow. I did not anticipate that many would hear it as geometry.” ——, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 399-400.


can step-up and/or step-down the voltage of current. If the third person in the triangle is able to stay in relationship with the other two points of the triangle, without trying to change their relationship, her or she serves as a step-down transformer. If the third person takes on responsibility for the relationship of the other two, however, he or she may serve to step-up the anxiety.

Triangles have a multigenerational character. According to Kerr, “triangles are forever, at least in families. Once the emotional circuitry of a triangle is in place, it usually outlives the people who participate in it.” It not uncommon for an unresolved conflict between great-grandparents to be played out by children several generations removed. Triangles are more or less active depending on fluctuations in anxiety. During very intense, chaotic periods, the number and intensity of interlocking triangles can be so great that they are impossible to see.

Interlocking triangles can be illustrated by the situation of the family who lost a child to violence. The father, very concerned about the impact of the child’s death on surviving siblings, carefully watches the children. When the functioning of one sibling seems to decrease, his focus and concern intensifies. His wife, however, does not share the same level of concern about the child’s functioning, and distances emotionally to

---


106 Ibid., 135-38.
manage her own anxiety. She also begins seeing her clergyperson to work through her
grief. Meanwhile, Father takes his concerns about his wife’s seeming lack of interest to
his own parents. He also shares his worry with the child’s teacher, who observes closely
and tries to help the child with solicitous attention. The child begins acting out in school,
which increases the teacher’s anxiety to the point that she recommends therapy for the
child. At this point, the following interlocking triangles easily are identified:

• Mother / father / focus child
• Mother / father/ father’s parents
• Mother / father / teacher
• Father / teacher / child
• Teacher /child / child’s therapist
• Father / child / child’s therapist
• Mother / father / clergyperson
• Mother / child / clergyperson
• Clergyperson / child’s therapist / father
• Clergyperson / child’s therapist / child

Seemingly, the list could go on through even more permutations. Diffusion of
anxiety into a larger system of interlocking triangles may calm the central triangle of
father, mother, and child. However, there is always the potential that anxiety will be
amplified as it spreads into the larger system (e.g., extended family, congregations,
schools, and mental health agencies). Eventually, the amplified anxiety can focus back on the family, actually increasing their potential for symptoms.

Friedman suggests that there are seven predictable ways that triangles operate. These laws of triangles, as he describes them, are:

• The relationship of any two members of an emotional triangle is kept in balance by the way a third party relates to each of them or to their relationship. When a given relationship is stuck, therefore, there is probably a third person or issue that is part of the homeostasis.  

• If one is the third party in an emotional triangle it is generally not possible to bring change (for more than a week) to the relationship of the other two parts by trying to change their relationship directly.

• Trying harder to bring two people closer together, e.g., brother and sister, or child and parent, or another party and his/her symptom, will generally maintain or increase the distance between them.

• To the extent a third party to an emotional triangle tries unsuccessfully to change the relationship of the other two, the more likely it is that the third party will wind up with the stress for the other two.

---

107 There is disagreement among Bowen theorists as to whether or not one point of a triangle can be an issue such as alcoholism, religion, or a disease process. Friedman identifies issues as parts of triangles. Kerr does not.
• The various triangles in an emotional system interlock so that efforts to bring change to any one of them are often resisted by homeostatic forces in the others or in the system itself.

• One side of an emotional triangle tends to be more conflicted than the others. In healthier families, conflict tends to show up in different persons or different relationships at different times. In less healthy relationships, the conflict tends to be located on one particular side of a triangle (the identified patient or relationship).

• We can only change a relationship in which we belong. The way to bring change to the relationship of two others is to try to maintain a well-defined relationship with each, and to avoid the responsibility for their relationship with one another. It involves the extent to which one can maintain a nonanxious presence, i.e., both non-anxious and present.108

Friedman’s final law about change in relationship triangles is also described as de-triangling. This central part of help and therapy from a Bowen perspective is discussed further below.

One of Bowen’s later concepts, societal regression, or emotional process in society bears noting. This concept states that just as a family exposed to chronic, sustained anxiety depends increasingly on emotionally driven decisions to calm anxiety,
so does the society as a whole. As a result, there is regression to lower levels of functioning at the societal level.\textsuperscript{109} This concept supports the use of BFST with organisms at all levels of life, from families, to businesses, to the broader society. For this dissertation, the concept of societal regression supports the application of BFST to troubled, anxious congregations. It is possible for an anxious congregation to regress to the point that its internal relationships and capacity to function as a body mirror the relationships and functioning of a very troubled family. As anxiety flows through interconnected families, institutions of society, and the society as a whole, any of the interconnected organisms has the capacity to step-up or step-down automatic reactivity. As I posit in Chapter 6, an increase in the differentiation of a congregational body has the potential to affect positively the wider institutions of society as well.

\textbf{What is Help? What is Care?}

Before defining care, it is necessary to identify an understanding of health through the lens of BFST. The word \textit{health}, and its derivative, \textit{healthy} are not common in this theory of human behavior. Dan Papero, a faculty member at the Bowen Center, addresses the question writing, “the notion of health is really one of functional state.”\textsuperscript{110} A healthy cell, organism, or individual has available to it a broader range of capabilities and options for behavior. A less healthy cell, organism, or individual has available to it

\textsuperscript{109} Bowen, \textit{Family Therapy in Clinical Practice}.

\textsuperscript{110} Papero, \textit{Bowen Family Systems Theory}, 23.
fewer capabilities and options. From the perspective of BFST, health is related to the ability to meet the challenges of the environment. A broader range of capabilities and options for behavior translates into greater capacity to meet challenges.

In BFST, health is not described as the absence of disease. Disease and health are not opposites. Health is a dynamic process, not a state to be attained. It is a process in which the organism is able to meet its needs for life. For an individual, the notion of health suggests an ability to function responsibly in relationships and society, as well as an ability to determine and pursue personal goals—always within the context of relationships. For a family, the notion of health suggests an ability to meet challenges in ways that prevent the development of long-term symptoms in any one member of the family, and encourage the differentiation of individual family members.111

The functioning of an individual can be diminished by physical, mental, and social symptoms. Rather than identifying the particular symptom as the cause of problems, BFST assumes that chronic anxiety and the emotional processes by which it is managed underlie all symptoms—physical, mental, and social. Furthermore, BFST assumes that a symptom held by an individual is related to imbalances in the wider family system—thus, it is a symptom of the family, not the individual.112


These assumptions are, perhaps, the most radical in Bowen’s thinking. In terms of mental health diagnoses, they suggest, first, that differences between specific forms of illnesses are quantitative rather than qualitative. Depression and personality disorders are not qualitatively different, but exist on the same continuum of functioning. Bowen’s quip that “we all have a little schizophrenia in us” illustrates this idea.\(^\text{113}\) Second, the assumption that an individual’s difficulties are a symptom of the imbalance of the wider family system suggests that no problem can be understood outside the context of the wider relationship system. This is a significant shift from the individual model of pathology that permeates our current view of disease. If chronic anxiety and the emotional processes by which it is managed are variables in all disease processes, then addressing these variables is a significant aspect of help and care.\(^\text{114}\)

No matter the nature of an individual’s or family’s clinical problems, two basic principles always govern therapeutic help guided by BFST: (1) “a reduction of anxiety will relieve symptoms, and (2) an increase in basic level of differentiation will improve adaptiveness.”\(^\text{115}\) The ultimate aim of all Bowen therapy is to promote differentiation within a family. Therapy, which involves helping to reduce anxiety and increase differentiation, always is guided by theory. The functioning of the therapist is key in the

\(^{113}\) Ibid., 12.

\(^{114}\) Kerr, "Chronic Anxiety and Defining a Self."

achievement of both anxiety reduction and increase in differentiation. As Friedman writes, “in Bowen theory, the differentiation of the therapist is technique.”\textsuperscript{116}

When a family or individual enters therapy, most often it is because levels of anxiety and methods of coping with it have led to symptoms that inhibit the ability to function. Thus, early in therapy, reduction of anxiety is central. By remaining calm and objective, by not getting caught up in one perspective or another (blaming and taking sides), and by asking thoughtful questions directed to the thinking of individuals, the therapist can help the system calm. Once the system is calmer, family members’ thinking, feeling, and behavior are driven less by automatic emotional responses and they are able to be more thoughtful.

The early period of therapy includes a family evaluation interview. Kerr lists ten basic questions to be addressed during these early sessions—many of which are answered through the development of the family diagram or genogram described in the section on the multigenerational transmission process. These questions are:

- Who initiated the interview?
- What is the symptom and which family member or family relationship is symptomatic?
- What is the immediate relationship system (this usually means the nuclear family) of the symptomatic person?

\textsuperscript{116} Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 138.
• What are the patterns of emotional functioning in the nuclear family?
• What is the intensity of the emotional process in the nuclear family?
• What influences that intensity—an overload of stressful events and/or a low level of adaptiveness?
• What is the nature of the extended family systems, particularly in terms of their stability and availability?
• What is the degree of emotional cutoff from each extended family?
• What is the prognosis?
• What are important directions for therapy?\textsuperscript{117}

With this information, the therapist is able to identify and focus on relationships and issues that have the greatest potential to reduce anxiety in the system and increase the basic level of differentiation.

Therapy from a Bowen perspective does not use a set of designated techniques. The very lack of distinction between therapy and theory is significant. The therapist maintains a research attitude—an attitude of inquiry about the emotional process of the family. The methodology of therapy is fairly simple and is determined by theoretical considerations. Papero describes this approach:

To the best of his or her abilities, the clinician attempts to relate calmly and naturally to the family. He or she does not actively attempt to make the family different. Interventions, or some move or action taken by the therapist to impact upon the family presumably in a positive manner, play little if any role. The

\textsuperscript{117} Kerr and Bowen, \textit{Family Evaluation}, 290, 327.
clinician focuses on gathering information, maintaining a broad perspective, obtaining and maintaining emotional neutrality, and operating from a research perspective.\(^{118}\)

Rather than working to change the family, the clinician seeks to learn about the family’s functioning, all the while working on his or her own differentiation.

Bowen lists four functions for the therapist: teaching about emotional systems, demonstrating differentiation by taking *I*-positions, defining and clarifying relationships between the client or clients and other emotionally significant individuals, and keeping one’s self “de-triangled” from the emotional process of the family.\(^{119}\) The final function warrants further explanation.

As explained above, triangles are the basic molecules of emotional systems, and are used to manage anxiety. Any two-person relationship is inherently unstable, and when anxiety levels increase, it is common that a third person is *triangled in* to manage the anxiety. The essence of the concept of the triangle is that “the emotional intensity between two people will resolve itself automatically if a third person can remain in active contact with each of them while remaining outside the emotional field between them.”\(^{120}\)

Or, as Bowen explains, “if the third person can continue to stay in contact with the


\(^{120}\) Papero, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, 73.
twosome without playing the familiar game of the twosome, the functioning of the twosome will automatically be modified.”

Whether working with a couple, an individual, or a family, a therapist is in a position to be triangulated into the family emotional process as clients seek to lure the clinician to ‘my side.’ Taking sides on issues is natural—something that is done by everyone growing up in a family. Yet, when a clinician takes sides, he or she has lost emotional neutrality, joined the emotional process of the family, and lost the ability to modify the functioning of the triangle and the larger family system. Remaining neutral, objective, curious, and at times humorous—while maintaining emotional contact with all parties—shifts long-standing relationship patterns and allows space to modify them.

Based on the assumption that the therapist is able to promote differentiation in a family only to the extent that the therapist has worked on his or her own differentiation, the focus of clinical supervision for therapists working from this perspective is more on the thinking and differentiation of the therapist than on the therapist’s clients. Family of origin work is central, as is continuous work to think theoretically about cases and about self, and to work on one’s own differentiation.

As Bowen expressed it, “systems therapy cannot remake that which nature created, but through learning how the organism operates, controlling anxiety, and learning to better adapt to the fortunes and misfortunes of life, it can give nature a better

---

121 Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 480.
Systems therapy generally is time-limited. The reality is that therapy is only the beginning of a life-long process of differentiation.

It is possible now to answer the two questions posed in the heading for this section. Help from the perspective of the Bowen/Friedman axis involves decreasing anxiety and increasing basic levels of differentiation. The primary tool for doing so is the way in which the therapist functions in relationship to the individual and/or family seeking help. Another tool involves offering a way to think about human problems (BFST) that allows clients to become more objective, which can help to lessen anxiety and reactivity, as well as encourage attention to familial patterns and the part the client plays in them.

I have defined pastoral care as ‘presence and guidance toward the restoring of soul.’ The presence of the helper is related to his or her differentiation. Again, the concept of soul is not present in Bowen’s scientifically oriented work. However, one can make certain connections in light of Friedman’s metaphorical approaches. I will make these connections in Chapter 4 as I continue the discussion of pastoral care and leadership of congregations from the perspective of the Bowen/Friedman axis.

---

122 Ibid., 410.
CHAPTER 4. A BOWEN/FRIEDMAN LENS ON CONGREGATIONS

Introduction

Although Bowen’s work was almost exclusively with families, a decade after the publication of his natural systems theory he turned his attention to the broader society. Noting “striking analogies between regression in a family and regression in larger social groups and society,” Bowen posited that “regression occurs in response to chronic sustained anxiety, …when the family, or society, begins to make important decisions to allay the anxiety of the moment.”¹ Just as he broadened the lens from the individual to the family to the multigenerational family—seeing in all the same emotional processes present in lower forms of life—Bowen again broadened the lens to include groups of individuals that, while not related as family, experience similar emotional processes. Bowen’s expansion of his thinking beyond the family to society, as described in the concept of societal regression, is the basis of its application to congregations and clergy.²


² Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy."
This concept has been used to understand and address problems in schools, work systems, government, and congregations.

According to Friedman, the applicability and helpfulness of the theory’s use with systems other than families is related to two factors: first, “the degree of emotional interdependency in that relationship system,” and second, “the extent to which its business is ‘life’.” 3 Despite variations in the degree of emotional interdependency between and within congregations, emotional interdependency is part of the nature of a congregational body. This, plus the fact that the business of the church is life, supports the assertion that BFST is highly applicable to faith communities. As Friedman observed, of all work systems, “the one that functions most like a family is the church or synagogue.” 4 I turn, then, to an application of BFST to congregations.

The Congregation Through a Bowen/Friedman Lens

Earlier I defined a congregation as group of people who identify with each other under a certain name, share a particular set of basic assumptions, and meet regularly to communicate to one another those assumptions.” 5 Through further discussion I developed the following working definition:

---

3 ———, Generation to Generation, 197.

4 Ibid., 198.

5 Bennison Jr. et al., In Praise of Congregations, 24.
The church and its congregations are human communities that share basic assumptions, among them the belief that God is on the side of life. The church and its congregations are *theotokos*, bearer of God to each other, neighbor, and the world. The church, as the body of Christ, continues the ministry of Christ in the world, at its ideal, embodying the love of God in its particular context.

Drawing on organic, living images—*theotokos* and body of Christ—this definition identifies the deeply relational nature of a congregation as well as its broad purpose. As noted in Chapter 2, this definition is very idealistic. Reality, in particular the reality of suffering congregations similar to those introduced previously, seldom lives up to this ideal. From the perspective of the Bowen/Friedman axis it is possible to identify processes that diminish the life of a congregation, as well as those that enhance it.

**The Congregation: An Emotional System**

Complex organisms are composed of diverse cells that function together for the life of the organism. Bodies are composed of diverse organs that function together for the life of the body. Families are composed of diverse individuals that function together for the life of the family.\(^6\) By extending the trajectory of increasing complexity, congregations can be described as composed of diverse families that function together for the life of the congregation. Although it already has been established that congregations have purpose beyond themselves—as *theotokos* and the body of Christ—in this section I focus on the functioning of the congregation rather than its purpose.

\(^6\) Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, 166.
A congregational body is an inter-related and mutually influential relationship system comprised of individuals who gather together on a regular basis. It also is an emotional system, driven by processes similar to those present in all of life. As Friedman writes, “the emotional structure of ‘organ’-izations replicates the emotional structure of the organisms we call families because, frankly, it’s the only way we know how to do it.”

Just as the conceptualization offered by BFST of the family as a whole as the unit of observation is helpful in understanding and helping troubled families, so is the ability to view a congregation as a whole as the unit of observation helpful.

The term *emotional system* is used in two related ways:  first, as automatic, instinctual behaviors that govern the dance of life, and second, as a relationship group that shapes the dance of life. Despite the idealistic hope held by some that a church family will be a community where mutual love and care always will overcome tendencies toward reactive or hurtful behavior, the same automatic, instinctual behaviors that sometimes lead to problems in families are present in congregations. In addition, the structure or field of the emotional system that “tends to influence the functioning of the various members more than any of the components tend to influence the functioning of the system,” is going to influence anyone for whom the congregation is significant.

---


8 Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 305.
emotionally—even a new leader who assumes he or she will be able to change the 
congregation.9

Each of the BFST concepts described in Chapter 3 is applicable to congregations. 
As emotional systems, congregations develop comfortable balances of togetherness and 
individuality. They have basic levels of chronic anxiety as well as processes with which 
they manage that anxiety. Congregations are multigenerational organisms, created by 
their pasts. They can be described as having an overall level of differentiation, and a close look reveals an abundance of interlocking triangles.

In every relationship in which people are emotionally significant to one another, 
the interplay of individuality and togetherness is important.10 Variations in their 
comfortable balance are related to the intensity of the emotional significance, also described as the proportion of life energy invested by an individual relationship.11 In general, people gravitate toward others who have similar needs for togetherness and investment of life energy in relationship. Families may gravitate toward congregations that, as a whole, have similar needs.12 As an emotional system, a congregation finds a comfortable balance of the forces of individuality and togetherness. The stronger the

9 Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 144.

10 Kerr and Bowen, Family Evaluation, 64. According to Kerr, “emotional significance means that a person is affected on an emotional, feeling, and subjective level by what another person thinks, feels, says, and does or by what is imagined another person thinks, feels, says, and does” (p. 64).

11 Ibid., 67.

12 Ibid., 65.
togetherness force, the more easily the balance can be disturbed. With a disturbance of balance, there is an increase in anxiety as well as in efforts to restore a comfortable togetherness. These efforts may include pressure to think and act in accordance with the group, or they may include withdrawal and distancing on the part of some individuals.13

Congregational systems have basic levels of chronic anxiety that are related to the strength of the togetherness force. The stronger the togetherness force, the higher the level of chronic anxiety, the less capacity the congregation has for adaptiveness and creative responses to challenge, and the greater potential it carries for the development of symptoms and impaired functioning. Congregations with high levels of chronic anxiety have little tolerance for difference and change.

Over time, congregations develop preferred ways of managing anxiety. I use the term congregational emotional processes to describe patterns common in congregations: drifting away (distancing), conflict, adaptation and overfunctioning to preserve harmony, and projection of anxiety onto a particular position or individual.14 Overuse of a congregation’s preferred mechanism for managing anxiety contributes to the development of symptoms. For example, if drifting away is common, leaders of a congregation may recognize the degree to which a challenge or problem has impacted the congregation only after attendance has decreased significantly. Or, a staff member who

13 Religious terminology and beliefs often intensity this pressure.

14 Kerr and Bowen, Family Evaluation, 255.
internalizes anxiety and adapts or overfunctions to maintain a comfortable balance within the congregational relationship system may develop physical symptoms.

The above descriptions of chronic anxiety and emotional process also highlight the multigenerational emotional process present in congregations. The past is in the present. As described by clergy consultant, Margaret Marcuson, “the founding of a church lays down patterns that show up in the present.”15 This is observable particularly in congregations that were founded as the result of a split in another congregation. Even in faith communities with less dramatic beginnings, the patterns of relating and managing anxiety developed early in their life together often continue as ‘fall-back’ relational patterns, especially when anxiety increases. Similarly, despite the fact that a particular problem lies far in a congregation’s past, sensitivity to that issue may remain.

Congregations have innumerable interlocking emotional triangles. When anxiety is low, they are not very obvious. However, as anxiety levels rise, they become active. In situations when a leader (A) has difficulty understanding an individual’s (B) reaction to him or her, Kerr suggests looking for the triangle. Often B is passing the anxiety of a third person (C) back to the leader.

---

A congregation can be described as having an overall level of differentiation.\textsuperscript{16} Related to its level of chronic anxiety and reactivity, differentiation describes a congregation’s capacity to adapt and respond to challenge and change, as well the clarity of its self-definition. Congregations with greater clarity of self-definition and an ability to operate from that self-definition are less likely to produce harmful internal crises such as intractable conflict and polarization, and are more likely to survive externally induced crises. As with individuals and families, differentiation is a key variable influencing the capacity to respond to difficulties. Two basic principles always guide therapeutic help guided by BFST: (1) symptoms will be relieved by a reduction of anxiety, and (2) adaptiveness to challenges will be improved by an increased in the basic level of differentiation. The differentiation of the therapist is the primary tool. In congregations, the differentiation of the leader is the primary tool.

To the extent that humans are understood as deeply relational creatures, a conceptualization of a congregation as an emotional system allows a leader to gain a sense of what is problematic, as well as what may be helpful. Given that families and congregations run on the same emotional processes, any increased understanding of the congregation is applicable as well to understandings of families of the congregation, as well as to one’s own family.

\textsuperscript{16} This is my extension of the concept of differentiation of self to congregations. Although it is intimated in Friedman’s descriptions of congregations as “pills or plums,” and by Steinke in terms of congregational health, it is not used specifically.
The Congregation: Intersecting Emotional Systems

Each family gathered in a congregation is an emotional system. The congregation itself is an emotional system. Thus, a congregation can be described as an emotional system comprised of multiple intersecting and interconnected emotional systems. As relational creatures, we are constantly influencing and being influenced by each other. The same is true for congregational systems and the family systems of which they are comprised. Families and congregations are mutually influential. As faith communities, relationships and interconnections between parts of the congregation, and between parts and the whole, are desirable. The hope is that these relationships offer mutual care, and serve to “equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:12 NRSV).

There are times, however, when connections have the potential to contribute to the difficulties of a congregation, as well as to those of its constituent families.

When influence is automatic, that is, when it is accepted or rejected without thought or evaluation, it can be problematic. The greater the sensitivity of the congregation (its leaders in particular) to attention, approval, expectations and distress (differentiation) and the greater the emotional significance of a family to the

---

17 Some clarification of Friedman’s use of the term family for members of a congregation is helpful. A congregation is comprised of individuals and families. However, in Friedman’s work and in this project, little or no distinction is made between individuals and families. From the perspective of BFST, individuals cannot be understood outside the context of their families. Thus, even if an individual is the sole member of the family active in a congregation, it remains appropriate to consider the congregation as a group of families, and to refer to an individual or couple as a family within the congregation. Family emotional process is present in individual behaviors – even when the extended family is not present.

18 Friedman, Generation to Generation.
congregation, the more likely it is that the influence will be accepted automatically, or rejected reactively. Similarly, the greater the sensitivity of a family to attention, approval, expectations, and distress, and the greater the emotional significance of the congregation and its leaders to the family, the more likely it is the family will automatically accept or reject the congregation’s influence.

Particular families in the congregation, especially those perceived as important to the congregation and its survival, influence the congregational system. The displeasure (or perceived displeasure) of a family with a long history in the congregation, and/or a family that makes significant financial contributions, can raise the anxiety level of congregational leaders. For example, suppose a family that regularly makes significant contributions to the congregation did not give an offering for several weeks. Fearful that the family was displeased and withdrawing, the finance committee experiences an increase of its already high level of anxiety. The finance committee chairperson talks to several members, and finally to the pastor, who informs him that the family is on an extended vacation. Anxiety decreases at that point. However, the committee chairperson’s engagement in preliminary speculation about what (or who) needs to change in order to keep this family content already has spread anxiety to staff members. The intensity of the finance committee’s anxiety relates to both the history of this pattern

---

19 Emotional significance, according to Kerr, is the degree to which “a person is affected on an emotional, feeling, and subjective level by what another person thinks, feels, says, and does or by what is imagined another person thinks, feels, says, and does.” Kerr and Bowen, Family Evaluation, 64.
of expressing displeasure, and to the level of sensitivity to actions that indicate approval or disapproval (differentiation).

As a system, a congregation can influence families of the congregation, especially those who have higher levels of sensitivity to attention, approval, expectations and distress, and those families for whom the congregation carries great emotional significance. Consider two examples: First, a family that has been frustrated with the congregation for several years enrolls their child in confirmation instruction. The family then becomes upset when the pastor points out that their child is not meeting basic attendance requirements for the program. Despite the fact that these expectations were stated clearly at the beginning of the program, and that the family’s involvement in soccer on Sunday mornings interferes with attendance, the parents interpret the observations about the child’s participation as criticism and disapproval.

Second, a change in the format of a festival worship service upsets a family that has attended that service for years. The matriarch of the family calls all the families in the congregation to make sure they know what happened, and how harmful she considers this change to be. In this situation, as in most, it is possible to observe the influence and anxiety moving back and forth between congregation and family and congregation and family.
Clergy at the Intersection

Individuals called to the office of pastoral ministry in a congregation occupy a unique position at the intersection of multiple emotional systems. Friedman described this phenomenon and its ramifications in the central hypothesis of *Generation to Generation*:

All clergymen and clergywomen, irrespective of faith, are simultaneously involved in three distinct families whose emotional forces interlock: the families within the congregation, our congregations, and our own. Because the emotional process in all of these systems is identical, unresolved issues in any one of them can produce symptoms in the others, and increased understanding of any one creates more effective functioning in all three.\(^\text{20}\)

The leader of any emotional system has the greatest potential to influence the functioning of that system.\(^\text{21}\) Yet, like any other person, the leader is also in the position of being influenced by the system.\(^\text{22}\)

*The Pastor and the Congregation*

As leader and shepherd of the faith community, the minister is in a unique position of responsibility, trust, and focus. He or she is called and charged with speaking words consistent with that particular faith tradition’s understanding of God. To a greater extent than with other congregational members, the words and actions of the pastor are

\(^{20}\) Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 1.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 221.

\(^{22}\) ———, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 144.
perceived to reflect the presence of the Divine. As Carroll observes, each week priests and pastors have “the opportunity to stand before a community… as theotokos, a ‘God-bearer,’ representing God to the people and the people to God.”

In highly visible roles such as worship presider, preacher, teacher, counselor, caregiver, and congregational leader, the pastor receives significant focus—both positive and negative. Often he or she is designated as the one responsible for the whole spectrum of congregational life, including its vitality and effectiveness. Because of this visibility, anxious members may be highly sensitive to any indications of disapproval, or lack of attention. Likewise, an anxious pastor may be very sensitive to similar indications from congregation members. A clergyperson easily can become the focus and instigator of anxiety. Similarly, a clergyperson can be the one who calms anxiety.

Recall Friedman’s observation that the emotional system has more influence on an individual than an individual does on the emotional system. While this observation is accurate, the position of the leader in a system does carry the possibility of greater influence. Because of the leadership position of the pastoral office, the potential of a clergyperson both being influenced by the system and influencing it is greater than for any other person in the congregation. The influence of the system may lead a pastor to give up his or her thoughts and principles in order to maintain harmony in the

---

23 Carroll, "Reflections of a Clergy Watcher."
congregation. On the other hand, a pastor who, in the midst of the influence of the system, is able to maintain his or her own thoughts and principles, while simultaneously remaining in respectful relationship with people holding other ideas, has greater potential to influence the congregation toward health.

The Pastor and Families in the Congregation

The minister’s unique connection with and entrée into families of the congregation requires special consideration. Through these connections, the pastor both influences and is influenced by those systems. In many cases, the influence is subtle and almost indiscernible. For example, after listening to a teenager complain about his mother’s nagging, there is a slight shift in the way the pastor thinks about this woman whom, to this point, he had held in high regard. (It could just as easily go the opposite direction, from mother to son.) Or, after hearing a sermon about the need for forgiveness in relationships, a husband informs his wife of her need to forgive him—for her own wellbeing. There are multiple potential endings to this particular scenario. In one, the wife calls the pastor to suggest he stay out of their marriage, and the pastor starts walking on eggshells around this whole family. In another, the influence of the clergyperson is positive, and couple works toward forgiving each other.

---

The Family of the Clergyperson

The clergyperson stands at the intersection of the congregation as family, families in the congregation, and his or her own family. Just like everyone else, the pastor has been shaped by the multigenerational emotional processes of the family of origin, and continually is influenced by ongoing relationships and events of that family and the nuclear family. He or she has a built-in comfortable balance of individuality and togetherness, a basic level of chronic anxiety, automatic ways of managing anxiety, and specific degrees of sensitivity to attention, approval, expectations and distress (differentiation). In addition, the pastor occupies a functional position in the family. All of these factors are brought into relationship with the congregation as a whole, and with families in the congregation.

The pastor’s baseline of functioning

The comfortable balance of individuality and togetherness differs from family to family, from congregation to congregation, and from pastor to congregation. As with the porcupines described in Chapter 3, some degree of difference can be adjusted to find a comfortable balance. If the degree of difference is too large however, complaints of distance and non-caring on one side may be countered with complaints of dependency and stifling on the other. A congregation or clergyperson with a stronger togetherness orientation is thrown off balance more easily, and thus is likely to be more anxious and
reactive in response to smaller disturbances. Little things are more bothersome. A pastor with a higher level of chronic anxiety is more sensitive and reactive to any indications—perceived or real—of disapproval or distance. Similarly, this pastor is more sensitive to expectations of congregation members, realistic or not, as well as to distress or perceived distress.

Nuclear family emotional process describes a family’s patterns of managing anxiety. As discussed in Chapter 3, the most common of these is distancing. Other common patterns are conflict, disproportionate adaptation by one spouse to preserve harmony (also known as reciprocal overfunctioning and underfunctioning), and projection onto a child or family member. The predominant pattern present in a clergyperson’s family of origin becomes automatic in interactions with an intense emotional system. The observations of several studies—that many clergypersons have a strong need for the approval of others, and are uncomfortable with anger in self and others—suggest that while conflict probably is not a primary means of managing anxiety for clergy, distancing, and overfunctioning appear to be common.25

Increasing distance between self and others is a natural way to deal with relationship anxiety. Everyone uses it, to an extent, to deal with discomfort. Challenges arise, however, when distance prevents parties from dealing with differences, when

distance extends to emotional cutoff, and when differences in the degree to which distance is used produce higher levels of anxiety and reactivity. In situations where the pastoral leader holds spiritual authority and is emotionally significant, distancing by the pastor can be perceived as rejection. In most congregational situations, the level of sensitivity to the pastoral office translates to increased sensitivity to any behavior that can be interpreted as disappointment or judgment.

Overfunctioning involves adapting self in order to maintain peace and calm in the system. It plays out in multiple ways, including taking responsibility to see that all tasks are done (overwork), absorbing anxiety to the point that physical, emotional, or social symptoms develop, and giving up self. Over the past decades the issue of clergy burnout has received much attention. In contrast to much of the literature, Friedman suggests that burnout is related less to overwork and more to the intensity of the congregational emotional system, and “to the extent its spiritual leader tends to overfunction.”

---


27 Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 217.
clergy complain consistently of being stuck with all the responsibility—from turning out
the lights to planning and implementing programming. Even more, however, clergy often
overfunction by taking responsibility that belongs to others—not just tasks, but
problematic relationships, the functioning of others and their discomfort. According to
Friedman, questions about burnout properly should focus less on the pastor suffering
symptoms, and more on the overloading system that has contributed to the development
of burnout symptoms in the leader. However, the automatic tendency of the pastor to
overfunction also requires attention.28

In his work on leadership Friedman uses the term peace monger to describe an
individual who overfunctions to avoid discomfort and conflict by giving up self (i.e.,
one’s own thinking and opinions). A peace monger is “a highly anxious risk-avoider who
is more concerned with good feelings than progress and whose life revolves around the
axis of consensus.”29 Finding it difficult to stand in the presence of conflict and
difference, peace mongers disappear at the first suggestion of conflict.

Like everyone else, pastors learn ways of managing anxiety in childhood and
carry them into adulthood. When anxiety levels rise, these automatic patterns of
functioning carry into the congregation. Patterns of emotional process, whether of a

28 Ibid., 210, 17.

29 Edwin H. Friedman, A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix (Bethesda, MD: Edwin Friedman Trust, 1999), 254.
nuclear family or a congregation, are facts of life. Yet, they raise questions such as, to what extent do particular patterns promote life, and to what extent do they diminish it?

According to Bowen, the basic level of differentiation of self is established by the time an adolescent or young adult leaves home. Unless and individual intentionally works on differentiation, it does not change much during adulthood. Thus, a clergyperson brings into the congregation his or her own automatic level of sensitivity to attention, approval, expectations, and distress, i.e., an established capacity to define self while staying connected. At lower levels of differentiation chronic anxiety and sensitivity to others is greater, and there is less flexibility and capacity to adapt to change and challenge. Lower levels of differentiation in the pastor inhibit the capacity for leadership. At higher levels of differentiation, the disapproval that inevitably comes with change and difference carries less weight. Thus there is greater potential for clarity of thinking and position, as well as for staying on course. The pastoral leader is able to attend to others, to be aware of approval, expectations, and distress of and in others, but has greater capacity to choose the extent to which he or she automatically and without thought will be influenced by the relationships. Although both pastor and congregation function at a particular level of differentiation, help always consists of efforts to raise levels of differentiation and increase capacities to adapt and respond to challenges.

---

Functioning position

Somewhat related to overfunctioning and underfunctioning is the concept of *functioning position*. As noted in the previous chapter, different expectations inherent in each sibling position result in predictable differences in how children function and develop. All things being equal, first-born children naturally take a leadership role, while last-born children are more likely to look to others for leadership. The sibling position of a clergyperson often is apparent in the way in which he or she leads the congregation. A firstborn may find the leadership position more natural, while a lastborn may find it difficult to give direction to others. Similarly, a middle child may be more sensitive to relationships on staff than an only child who grew up without siblings. It is important to keep in mind, however, that other variables influence the ways in which individuals in particular sibling positions function. ‘All things’ generally are not equal.

The idea of sibling position (related to the parental triangle) is helpful in thinking about an individual’s functioning position. To some degree, all children function to stabilize the parental relationship. The ways in which they do this differ. To illustrate: The firstborn child of a couple that manages anxiety with reciprocal overfunctioning and underfunctioning may learn to overfunction in relationship to her underfunctioning and depressed mother—thus stabilizing the marital relationship. The second child in the

---

same family may learn to use underfunctioning and/or acting out to draw attention away from the intense relationship triangle of the other three—again offering some stability to the marital relationship.\textsuperscript{32}

Another important aspect bears noting. Unresolved issues with one’s family of origin can become significant in one’s new families—whether a family through marriage, or the pastor’s new family—the congregation. The intensity of unresolved issues may increase or decrease in relationship to actual contact with one’s family of origin, or when similar issues arise in relationship with congregational members.\textsuperscript{33}

In addition to the potential impact of the family of origin and unresolved issues on a clergyperson’s functioning, it is important to note that ways in which a family has responded to difficult challenges and resolved tough issues in the past also serve as preparation for the clergyperson working in a congregation.

Nuclear Family

In addition to the family of origin, a pastor also is part of a current nuclear family system, within which, day by day, he or she both influences and is influenced. The clergy family has its own nodal points, its own strengths, challenges, tragedies, relationship shifts, and changes to manage. As with all families, there is a constant balancing act as it


\textsuperscript{33} Friedman, \textit{Generation to Generation}. 

161
faces challenges, adjusts, adapts, and attempts to find its way through the trials of life. Clergy families, however, manage their balancing act with greater scrutiny than most families. Given that the congregation served by the clergy parent usually is the congregation in which the family is active, the clergy person is in the position of having his or her employers (sometimes hundreds of them) in close, ongoing contact with his or her family. Seldom does the child of a clergyperson run down a church hall without notice (or comment). The lack of privacy is challenging, especially when a child acts out or a marriage is in turmoil.

It is challenging going the other direction, as well. How much does a clergyperson share with family about situations in the congregation and the lives of its members? How much do congregation members assume their pastor has shared with a spouse? Triangles are numerous, and can be very active. For example, a clergy spouse and congregational member are good friends. Tension develops between the clergyperson and the spouse of the congregational member. If either person in the tense relationship speaks to his or her spouse about the tension, multiple relationships are influenced.

The dual role of spouse/parent and pastor also is difficult. Clergy families often feel that they do not have a pastor. When the clergyperson changes congregations or retires, the family’s faith community changes as well. The primary relationship of the
family to the congregation is through the call or employment of the pastor. Thus, when there are tensions and changes, the relationship of the family to the congregation shifts.

It is important to acknowledge that mutual influences also are positive. The focus here on more challenging and negative factors is intended to bring them to awareness and highlight the ways in which influences between the congregation, family of origin, and nuclear family flow back and forth across the intersection that is the clergyperson.

Intersecting the Broader Context

While the primary focus here is on congregations, families in the congregation, and the clergy family as being mutually influential, it is important to recognize that the congregation with all of its intersecting systems is positioned between families and society. Friedman describes families as the basic molecules of society. They both affect and are affected by the larger society. Anxiety coming from each family projects into the extended families, and into the institutions of society: religious, governmental health care, works systems, school systems, and the judicial system. Societal institutions, responding to the anxiety of families in society, become more anxious. Anxiety flows the other direction as well. Threats to and within the larger society generate anxiety in individuals and families. The media, especially with rapid communication, reflects anxiety raised by real threats back into the institutions of society. In this time of rapid

\[34\text{———, A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix, 118.}\]
communication, it is not unusual to find that the acute anxiety generated by real threats develops into chronic anxiety—fear of perceived or possible threats. Families, the molecules of society, often magnify the anxiety and then project it back into the institutions. Friedman’s ending point was that society, including its families and institutions, becomes an “emotional glob” within which “it is extremely difficult to be a self-differentiated person or leader.”

My primary point is not that society has become an emotional glob, but rather, that anxiety, often intensified by the media, flows back and forth between families and institutions of the society. Religious institutions, according to Friedman,

...are smack on the boundary between family and society, and [are] caught in the vortex of this escalation, as parishioners and congregants displace their personal and family anxieties into institutions that are already caught up in the collective anxiety of the human family.

Congregations, as institutions of society whose members are families, receive anxiety from the wider society. The anxiety may be general, or may come more specifically from situations in which a family of the congregation is impacted directly by societal events. How the congregation responds to anxiety coming at it from multiple directions is significant: the congregation’s response to the anxiety carries the potential to magnify

35 Seminar notes, Edwin H. Friedman, October 23, 1996, Bethesda, MD. Ibid.

36 For example, when news spread of the H1N1 (swine flu) epidemic during the summer of 2009, despite the fact that this was an unexpectedly mild form of flu and that there were very few cases in the U.S. at that time, anxiety increased to the point that some people drastically curtailed all activities.

and/or decrease it. A congregation that is able to respond to real threats with greater thoughtfulness has more options for action. While there are dire situations in which greater thoughtfulness makes no discernible difference, the majority of life’s challenges benefit from lower reactivity and careful thought.

A Framework for Assessing Congregations

Early sessions of therapy from the perspective of BFST include gathering extensive information about the presenting problem as well as the nuclear and extended families of clients. I have adapted the framework for assessment of families developed by Kerr for use with congregations. As with family assessment, the congregational assessment developed here includes both information gathering and interpretation. Due to the nature of the interlocking emotional systems present in a congregation, the amount of data gathered is significant, and the process of interpretation is complex.

This framework for assessing congregations has three components. The first is a discussion of congregational health from the standpoint of the Bowen/Friedman axis. The second component includes a guide for gathering and interpreting congregational data. The final component is a discussion of ways in which the position of the individual gathering and interpreting the data influences the process.
Congregational Health

From the perspective of BFST, the understanding of health is related to the functioning of the organism. Papero describes health as follows:

…a healthy cell, organism, or individual has capabilities and options for behavior that are possible, and that differ from the capabilities and options available to a less healthy cell, organism, or individual. Thus, health from this perspective is related to the ability to meet the challenges of the environment.\(^{38}\)

Peter Steinke, pastor, therapist, and developer of *Healthy Congregations* workshops expands this understanding. He writes:

Health is wholeness. Health means all the parts are working together to maintain balance. Health means all the parts are interacting to function as a whole. Health is a continuous process, the ongoing interplay of multiple forces and conditions…

Thus, health is the capacity for life, what an organism must do to persevere. Health is the ability of a living system to respond to a wide assortment of challenges to its integrity.\(^{39}\)

From the perspective of BFST, the health of a congregation has to do with its functioning, i.e., its ability to meet the challenges of its environment, to respond to change, and to adapt.

This functional understanding of a healthy congregation needs, in addition, the central concept of BFST: differentiation of self. Friedman describes differentiation as “the lifelong process of striving to keep one’s being in balance through the reciprocal


\(^{39}\) Steinke, *Healthy Congregations*, vii-viii.
external and internal processes of self-definition and self-regulation.\textsuperscript{40} A healthy congregation has clarity of self-definition. It knows why it exists and ‘what it is about,’ i.e., its purpose. There is an integration of its beliefs with its actions. Thus, the health of a congregation is related to its ability ‘to be about what it is about,’ in the face of challenge and change in the environment.\textsuperscript{41}

Congregations unable to respond to challenge and unclear about what they are about, are less healthy. It is possible, however, for a congregation to appear to be healthy —to function fairly well without clarity of purpose for a long period of time. Things are done simply because that is the way things always have been done. When significant challenges and change occur, however, less healthy congregations have diminished ability to respond and may develop symptoms. Symptoms in congregations are related to imbalances of the larger congregational emotional system, and/or its intersecting emotional systems. They may be physical, emotional, and/or social, and seen in individuals, in highly conflicted relationships among individuals or groups, and in the overall functioning of the organism.

\textsuperscript{40} Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 140-42.

\textsuperscript{41} Although “what a congregation is about” may also be described as the congregational “mission”, avoidance of the word here is intentional. Too often a mission statement is developed by a small group in the congregation, placed in a prominent place, and assumed to be an accurate description of why the congregation exists. By using the phrase “what the congregation is about” my hope is that congregations will struggle with this question in an honest and on-going manner, recognizing that some of the answer to this question may lie in hidden or underground dynamics.
Although the major symptoms in the study congregations are conflict and lethargy, it is important to note that any number of difficulties in any number of individuals and/or relationships could be symptoms of impaired health and functioning of a congregational body. Symptoms experienced by a staff member (especially the pastor who stands in the intersection of multiple systems), or key member of the congregation, may be related to the congregation and its intersecting systems. Serious or chronic illness, substance abuse, severe marital conflict, and sexual acting-out of a pastor or key leader in the congregation may be indicators of the health of the congregation, not just the health of the individual.

Symptoms are indicators of imbalance. At least initially, symptoms are not the cause of imbalance. From the perspective of BFST, it is always necessary to look below the symptoms to the underlying emotional processes. Although symptoms impact congregational functioning, the way in which the congregation responds them is a significant variable. Again, the congregation’s clarity of self-definition is a factor.

For example, the less clarity a congregation has about its purpose, the less able it is able to respond to challenges from the environment. Diminished ability to respond to challenges produces greater anxiety, and greater anxiety challenges standard coping mechanisms (i.e., distancing, conflict, over/underfunctioning, and projection onto another) to the extent that the coping mechanisms become maladaptive. Thus, distancing

---

becomes cutoff, or conflict leads to polarization that seemingly is intractable; or a staff member absorbs anxiety to the point that it exacerbates a pre-existing physical condition and she becomes ill; or the problem is seen to belong just to the pastor. who, in the eyes of many, must leave in order for the congregation to heal.43

Any number of stressors can trigger an imbalance in a congregational system, including finances, sex and sexuality, leadership styles, growth and survival, trauma and transition, staff conflict and resignation, harm to a child or the death of a child, and the introduction of something new.44 The critical factor in the outcome of these triggers, according to Steinke, is the response of the leaders.

Again, it is important to clarify that neither the triggers, nor the specific symptoms that develop from a failure to adapt effectively to the initial disturbances are the cause of problems. Rather, they are indicators of emotional processes that must be addressed and shifted if the congregation desires to function in a healthier way. Assessment of a troubled congregation involves identification of these underlying emotional processes.

Assessing Congregational Functioning

The goals of help or therapy from a BFST perspective are always to decrease anxiety and increase differentiation of self. A congregational assessment helps movement

---

43 Steinke, Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What.

44 Ibid., 15-17.
toward these goals in several ways. First, the process of assessment offers opportunities for the congregation to learn about itself, i.e., to gain a clearer view of the way in which it functions currently, ways in which it has functioned throughout its history, and how shifts in functioning could be helpful. As Kerr describes the therapeutic process for families,

Therapy based on systems theory is guided by the assumption that it is not necessary for a therapist to diagnose the family’s problem. If the therapist is reasonably successful at maintaining a systems orientation, the family will begin to diagnose its own problems and to develop its own direction for change. It is important for a therapist to make his own assessment of the nature of the family problem, but he does this primarily to maintain his bearings in the family and to plan productive areas of inquiry.  

Thus, the process of congregational assessment is not a diagnosis, but rather the beginning of a learning process for the congregation as well as a way for the clergy leader/caregiver to maintain his or her bearings in the congregation, and determine a focus for questions.

Second, to the extent that the person (pastoral leader or consultant) leading the assessment is able to work on differentiation of self, to maintain a curious yet neutral stance toward the congregation and its difficulties, and to avoid taking responsibility for fixing it, the process of assessment itself is helpful. Third, given that the assessment is grounded in BFST, and that the information gathered does not seek to place blame, the process of assessment itself allows a reframing of the problems in a way that emphasizes their systemic nature.

\[45\] Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, n 293.
When symptoms—whether conflict, lethargy, or impaired functioning of leader—diminish and/or inhibit a congregation’s capacity to function as the body of Christ, the initial steps of a congregational assessment through the Bowen/Friedman lens seek to identify three things: first, are the symptoms acute or chronic, i.e., does the system have the resources and capacity to deal with the challenge and move on, or are deeper shifts necessary? Second, what emotional processes have contributed to the development of the symptom and/or are inhibiting their resolution? Third, what resources are available to support change and healing?

It is important to note at this point that I use the terms clergy leader, pastoral caregiver, and person leading the assessment synonymously. At the end of this section, I will address ways in which the formal relationship of the person leading the assessment influences the process.

The process of assessment involves two primary steps: first, data relevant to the functioning and relationship systems of the congregation are gathered; and second, the data are interpreted in light of the understandings of the Bowen/Friedman axis.

Data gathering

Data gathered in the process of congregational assessment fall in four broad areas: the presenting problem, the congregation now, the history of the congregation, and key family systems—in particular, the clergyperson and his or her family. Because these
areas are interrelated, information in one area expands the understanding of others. A brief description of relevant information in each of the areas is offered here. Appendix E, *Congregational Assessment: Guide for Collection of Data*, offers a more detailed guide for gathering data for the assessment, as well as recommendations on sources and means of collecting data. The focus of data gathering from this perspective is on facts: who, what, when, where, and how are the primary questions. Questions of ‘why’ invite subjective interpretations of events and motivations that, in Bowen’s view, are not helpful.\(^{46}\) By looking at facts, it is possible to identify emotional processes, levels of reactivity, and overall congregational differentiation.

The presenting problem

From the initial contact of the pastoral leader/caregiver with members of a troubled congregation, the way in which that individual functions in the midst of the anxious congregational system has the potential to be helpful. The place to begin is the congregation’s presenting problem and/or primary symptom. The following factual questions are asked of multiple persons, especially key members of the congregational system:

- What is the problem?
- When did it start?

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 61.
Who is involved in it?

What has been the course of the problem or symptom?

What solutions have been tried? How have they worked/not worked?

How do you see the problem impacting you? ...the congregation?

The purpose at this point is not to determine truth or to fix the problem. Rather, the purposes are to hear different perceptions of the problem, to gather factual information about it, and to function as a calm, connected presence in the midst of an anxious situation.

This information can be gathered in one-on-one meetings, or with small groups. When working with groups, I use a one-on-one clinical interview approach in which others are allowed to overhear my conversation with an interviewee, but they are requested to not interrupt or interject their thoughts and reactions. At the completion of the one-on-one interview, others listening in are invited to share their thoughts with me. The way in which the person leading this process welcomes and accepts all perceptions serves as a model for others.

---

47 The clinical style used with couples and/or families in BFST-based therapy involves one family member talking with the therapist while the others listen and consider his or her own thinking on the issue. Family members are not encouraged to talk to each other, but rather are assisted to externalize their thinking as clearly as possible while the therapist directs the interview with questions based in theory.
The congregation now

Through hearing about the presenting problem, the pastoral leader/caregiver learns a great deal about congregation. However, it is important intentionally to broaden the lens from the focus on the presenting problem to a view that includes the congregation as a whole. A description of the ‘congregation now’ includes information about staff members, key leaders and members, attendance, finances, programs and clarity of mission, as well as information on any additional internal or external stressors, challenges or changes that are being faced by the congregation, families in the congregation, and the community as a whole. Stressors might include things such as a terrorist attack, the closing of a company in the community, a recession, the death of a parent, or illness of a family member.

The history of the congregation

Families and congregations are shaped throughout multigenerational histories. Thus, by opening the lens yet again to develop a picture of the congregation’s functioning over the years, it is possible for the person doing the assessment and the congregation to identify patterns and processes that may have contributed to the intensity of the present problem, and to discern strengths and resources available to encourage healing. Furthermore, if Friedman is accurate in his assessment that all institutions ‘institutionalize’ the emotional processes (and pathology) of its founding families, a
complete history can be illuminating. One added benefit of a congregational history is that it assists clergy leaders new to the system to identify some of the congregation’s hot-button issues before inadvertently blundering into them.

The age of a congregation and its attention to record keeping can make the development of a history more or less difficult. Although a time consuming project, generally, it is possible to put together a representative picture of the congregation’s functioning over the years. Again, the focus is on factual information, such as membership, attendance, finances, lay and ordained leaders and other staff members, building projects, challenges (internal and external), accomplishments, and joys.

Although developing a history of the congregation is a major project, it gives a context for the current problems, a framework through which a congregation is able to gain more neutrality, and an accounting of strengths in the congregation. Involvement of congregation members in the project offers an opportunity for them to begin to identify patterns in their history.

Key family systems

While it is unnecessary to include information on each family in the congregation in the gathered data, it is important to look at families of individuals who are influential in the congregation, and in particular, any who specifically are involved in the presenting

---

problem. These might include: staff members, lay leaders—whether or not currently
serving in an elected position, the most recent former pastor(s) of the congregation, and
anyone else who played a significant role in the presenting problem—including families
that have left the congregation in response to the difficulties.

To the extent possible, these questions are considered: What is the family
configuration? What changes and challenges has it experienced? How has it responded
to those changes and challenges? What is the overall level of anxiety of the family?
What symptoms are present in the family? Further information should be gathered
regarding the member of the family who is most involved in the emotional processes of
the congregation. Although, at first glance, gathering personal and family information
may appear intrusive, it is part of a natural and crucial process of connecting with
congregational members. Specific information to be gathered is outlined in

*Congregational Assessment: Guide for Data Collection*, in Appendix E. All of the
information gathered about key families in the congregation also is gathered for the
current clergyperson and his or her family.

A perusal of the *Guide for Collection of Data* in Appendix E suggests that the
information to be gathered in this process is voluminous. It is. Two issues arise at this
point: first, how necessary is it to gather each piece of data, and second, how can the data
be recorded in a way that it is accessible?
In terms of data collection, not all of the information is necessary and important. As the process proceeds, aspects that are important to the difficulties of the congregation become more obvious. Aspects that have little relationship to the problem are disregarded. The purpose of gathering data is for the leader and the congregation to gain a picture of the emotional process of the congregation that can then inform and guide choices about care and leadership.

Recording data so that it is accessible is challenging. BFST makes use of family diagrams or genograms to record data about families. Although family diagrams (genograms) are useful in recording data about families in the congregation, the scope of a congregational assessment exceeds the capacity of this particular tool. Chronological charts of the history of the presenting problem and the history of the congregation, and organizational charts based on family diagram symbols are helpful. Examples of these charts are located in Appendix F, Congregational Assessment: Sample Charts for Data Recording.

Interpretation of the Data

Assessment of the congregation requires an interpretation of the collected data. Again, the purpose of an interpretation of data by the leader is not to diagnose the congregation. Rather, it is to assist in developing hypotheses and questions that are

---

49 Kerr/Bowen; McGoldrick, etc. Bowen was first to develop the family diagram. Others have recorded and extended work with family diagrams, some using the term “genogram”.

177
helpful to the congregation’s conceptualization of problems and what is necessary to bring healing. In addition, it assists the pastoral leader to gain awareness of potential reactions and issues that can inhibit the healing process. Six interpretive categories are used in this assessment: the symptom and/or symptomatic person, stressors and stress, congregational and family emotional process, emotional reactivity, resources beyond the congregation, and congregational differentiation. Once the data are considered in light of these categories, a prognosis can be made, and the leader can develop plans for learning, challenging, and In contrast to a diagnosis, a prognosis is a hypothesis regarding what may be possible in the near future.

Because of the interrelated nature of BFST, it is important to bear in mind that these interpretive categories also are interrelated. A worksheet of the interpretive categories is in Appendix G, Congregational Assessment: Guide for Interpretation of Data.

The symptoms and/or symptomatic persons

Because the presenting problem of a congregation generally is a symptom of the imbalance of a congregational system, identification of the primary symptom in a congregation is fairly straightforward. In addition to the symptom itself, note whether it is physical, emotional, or social. Indicate the severity of the problem and assess the degree of functional impairment associated with it.
The most common symptoms of troubled congregations seeking assistance are conflict and lethargy. If the symptom is identified as conflict, the primary individuals involved and any subsequent polarized groups are identified, and the severity and longevity of the conflict are assessed. Because, according to BFST, the intensity of the conflict is related more to the emotional processes at work than the content of the conflict, the content is noted only briefly. If the symptom is identified as lethargy, recent situations in which change has been attempted are noted, as are the parties involved, its severity and longevity.

In assessing congregations it is important to be aware of the presence of secondary symptoms that might be carried by individuals in positions of responsibility, and/or in their nuclear family systems. Review the data and note any symptoms—physical, emotional, or social—that may be carried by a leader in the congregation or a member of a leader’s family. Follow the process outlined above to describe these symptoms.

Stressors and level of stress

Identify particular events or stressors that have disturbed the emotional equilibrium of the congregational system. Stressors, as understood in BFST, are the

---

50 Congregational consultant, Speed Leas, identifies five levels of conflict from disagreement to fanaticism. Speed Leas and Susan K. Henderson, "When Conflict Erupts in Your Church," in Conflict Management in Congregations, ed. David B. Lott (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001).
events, not the reactions or chain reactions set in place by particular stressors. In a
congregation, stressors may include:

- Changes in leadership: pastoral, staff, and/or lay;
- Illness, injury, or death of a person important to the life of the congregation;
- Financial difficulties;
- Building construction, destruction, or possibility for major change;
- Misconduct of a staff member or leader of the congregation; and
- External factors: e.g., denominational, political, social, and/or economic.

The intersecting nature of systems requires a review of events or stressors in the
lives of leaders as well. The greater responsibility a leader holds in the congregation, the
more likely it is that an event in his or her family has the potential to disturb the
emotional balance of the congregation. Any of the events noted in Chapter 3 as potential
stressors for family systems are applicable here.

The number of events, plus their magnitude, and the time between events are used
to determine the level of stress of a congregation. A congregation that has experienced
several stressors over a period of a few months, for example, the unexpected death of an
important member of the congregation, a break-in/burglary, and the resignation of a staff
member is under moderate stress. A congregation that has experienced accusations of
clergy sexual misconduct, the loss of major financial givers, and is in the midst of a
building program is under severe stress.
Congregational and family emotional process

As noted earlier, the term *congregational emotional process* describes patterns of emotional functioning in a congregational family. Common relationship patterns visible in congregations include drifting away (distancing), conflict, overfunctioning on the part of an individual to preserve harmony, and projection onto a particular position or individual. Because a congregational emotional system will tend to influence the functioning of an individual in the congregation more than that individual will influence the functioning of the system, it is important for a leader to gain a sense of the congregation’s emotional processes. The principal patterns are identified through study of the history as well as ways in which the presenting problem has been managed.

The pattern of emotional functioning that contributes to presenting the problem is usually easiest to identify. Obviously, in conflictual situations in congregations, conflict is the primary pattern. Similarly, in a lethargic congregation, distancing—whether emotional or physical—is primary. Other patterns may be less obvious.

For example, if the history of the congregation reveals a pattern of illnesses and difficulties in clergy and/or their families, the pattern may be overfunctioning on the part of leaders who adjust themselves and absorb anxiety to the point that symptoms develop. Identifying connections between the health of leaders and staff members, and congregational functioning is important. Rather than locating a problem solely in the individual, from the perspective of a Bowen/Friedman axis it is possible to see that the
pastor’s substance abuse, and/or the organist’s ongoing physical difficulties are related to the anxiety in the congregation.

When the history of the congregation reveals frequent turnover in a particular position it may be an indication that projection onto another is a primary pattern of managing anxiety. For example, if an anxious congregation pins its hopes for revitalization on an active youth program, the intense focus on the performance and success of the youth director may make that position almost unbearable. Another example of how projection of focus onto another serves to calm anxiety is seen in the congregation that organizes itself to care for one family that is experiencing severe challenges, (often the family of a clergy person). Upon resolution of the difficulties, the congregation may have difficulty regaining a sense of what it is about—other than focus on this family.

It is important also to note patterns of emotional process in families of leaders and key individuals. With intersecting emotional systems, emotional process can begin to transfer from family to congregation, and vice a versa.

Emotional reactivity

The level of emotional reactivity or chronic anxiety in a nuclear family is based on “the number of symptoms in the family, the degree of functional impairment associated with those symptoms, the amount of distance and/or conflict in relationships,
and the amount of anxiety and reactivity members appear to have.” A way to think about emotional reactivity in congregational systems is to consider distance and twitchiness. The reality is that some congregational members simply avoid church when the emotional intensity is high. Others may attend worship, but reduce involvement in other activities, and maintain an emotional distance with others who are there. Thus, lower attendance at worship and other activities may be an indicator of emotional reactivity.

Friedman uses the term twitch to describe an unthinking, automatic, and always serious response that “by-passes the conscious and is more biological than unconscious.” It is somewhat like the automatic, almost reflexive response that an organism makes to protect self. Twitchiness in a congregation can be seen in automatic reactions to any changes, previously volatile issues, or even comments that may seem innocuous to a person new to the system, but raise the level of tension in the congregation.

For example, unbeknownst to the leader of a “Healthy Congregations” workshop on anxious congregations in a very anxious congregation, she identified one of the primary characters in a videotape saying, “there’s ______.” As the video continued,

51 Kerr and Bowen, Family Evaluation, 120.
52 Friedman, Generation to Generation, 230.
53 Peter L. Steinke, Healthy Congregations Workshop Facilitator Manual (Austin, TX: Healthy Congregations, 1997).
she was aware of rising levels of tension in the room, but unaware of its trigger. Two
days after the workshop she learned that a primary player in the congregation’s intense,
polarized conflict carried the name of the character in the videotape. When she said,
“there’s _______,” workshop participants assumed she had named this particular person.
The emotional reactivity of this group was very high. On a scale of 1 - 10, it would
easily be 9. An awareness of the level of emotional reactivity in a congregation is
crucial, especially for the pastoral leader working in and with the congregation.

Resources beyond the congregation

Assessment of families through the Bowen lens includes discernment of the
availability of the extended family as a resource for work on differentiation. Attention is
given to the intactness and stability of the family of origin, and to the degree of emotional
cutoff present, particularly between the nuclear family and previous generations. In
congregational assessment, the focus turns to the connections of the congregation to its
community and to the wider church body of which it may be a member. Although
primary consideration is given to the congregation, assessment of the degree of emotional
cutoff present in families of key leaders also is helpful.

Consider the congregation in its broader context. What connections does the
congregation have with its context? Are there relationships with other congregations and
ministries in the community? Are there particular stressors in the context that impact the
congregation? What is the relationship with the wider church to which the congregation is related? If there is tension or cutoff, not only are there fewer potential resources for the congregation but also these are indicators of the emotional process and reactivity ingrained in the congregational system. Also consider the relationships of past members, both lay and clergy, to the congregation. Do people continue to stay in-touch? Are former members welcome at worship, or are these relationships cutoff?

For key individuals in the congregation, it is helpful to discern the degree of emotional cutoff present in their extended families. When individuals cut off from family because of the intensity of the emotional process, often they invest strongly in a substitute family. However, as Kerr describes it, “the more complete the cutoff with the past, the more likely it is that a more intense version of the past (or its mirror image) will be repeated in the present.”\(^5^4\) At times the congregation plays the role of the substitute family for an individual—whether a clergyperson, professional leader, lay leader, or lay member. In these situations there can be high expectations of others in the congregation to ‘do it right.’ Unfortunately, others may not have the same definition of ‘right,’ nor the same need. An individual who uses cutoff to manage anxiety and undifferentiation in the family of origin is more likely to use it in other intense situations, such as a congregational family.

\(^{5^4}\) Kerr and Bowen, Family Evaluation, 272.
Congregational differentiation: Adaptiveness and definition

There are broad variations in the capacities of individuals, families, congregations and all emotional systems to respond to challenges and change. The level of differentiation, or maturity describes these variations. As discussed earlier, the differentiation of a congregational family is related to its ability to adapt to change and challenge, as well as its self-definition, or understanding of ‘what it is to be about.’ It is assessed through a comparison of the system’s level of stress with its level of emotional reactivity. A low level of stress with a high level of reactivity indicates low adaptiveness. A high level of stress with lower levels of reactivity indicates greater adaptiveness. ⁵⁵ The most accurate assessment of congregational (or family) adaptiveness is based in a study of its history. An evaluation of the congregation’s functioning (symptoms) during times of high stress, and/or of the level of stress during symptomatic periods during its history gives an overall picture of its capacity to adapt to challenge and change.

As discussed earlier, the greater the clarity of purpose or self-definition of a congregation and its leaders, the greater its ability to adapt to and respond to challenges and change with lower levels of reactivity. The question addressed here is this: Does the congregation have clarity about why it exists and what it is about? This goes beyond having a vision or mission statement posted somewhere in the building, a statement that is pointed to when someone asks about the congregations vision. Clarity of

⁵⁵ Ibid.
congregational self-definition is present when a majority of the members—and in particular the leaders—know, and are able to articulate why they are there, and what the church is about. For some congregations, this is a new question. For years they have lived and functioned almost automatically—doing what they do because that is what they are supposed to do. Unfortunately, when these congregations experience significant stressors and anxiety, the ‘fuzziness’ of their self-understanding, and the fact that different individuals (including clergy) often have different (and often unarticulated) views of the congregation’s self-definition, makes it more difficult to respond and adapt.

While it is not helpful, generally, to assign a specific level of differentiation, for the purpose of this process, use of a scale of 1 – 10 is helpful. The congregation’s differentiation or maturity is significant in terms of the care and leadership needed to assist the congregation to raise its level of functioning, and its prognosis.

Prognosis

Given a family’s levels of anxiety and differentiation, as well as the intensity of its present stressors, Bowen theory suggests it is possible to make fairly accurate predictions about outcomes. Assessment of congregations through from this perspective also suggests that it is possible to predict the outcome. Interpretation of the data in light of the categories listed above leads to prognosis: given the symptom, stressors and level of stress, emotional reactivity, resources, and differentiation of the congregation, what is
a probable outcome? Is the presenting problem of the congregation something that will be resolved, or is it chronic? Will it diminish when anxiety is relieved only to reappear as a different symptom the next time anxiety levels increase? What will be necessary for the congregation to meet this challenge and be able to function to meet other challenges in the future?

With families, prognosis suggests guidelines for therapy. With congregations, prognosis suggests guidelines and strategies for pastoral care and leadership. Again, therapy from this perspective always has two primary goals: to lower the anxiety, and to increase the level of differentiation. This holds true with families, congregations, and all emotional systems. The final section of this chapter describes how a pastoral caregiver and leader can help a congregation to lower anxiety and increase differentiation.

The Person/Position Leading the Assessment Process

To this point there has been no discussion of the position of the individual leading the process of assessing congregational health. The assumption is that the person leading the assessment process also leads the helping process. Congregations that are experiencing significant difficulties have several options available in seeking help. These include hiring an outside consultant, calling a new pastor (either permanent or interim), and/or having a current pastor work more intentionally on resolving issues and increasing the congregation’s ability to function as a faith community. Each of these positions has
unique assets and challenges, and will follow different courses of action. The focus here is on ways in which the position of the pastoral caregiver/leader impacts the process of assessment.

Some congregations at an impasse choose to hire a congregational consultant. Although this process of gathering and interpreting data can be used by a consultant (whose contact with the system is periodic and time-limited), it will require significant involvement from other congregational leaders. Information about the \textit{Presenting Problem} and \textit{the Congregation Now} is gathered through multiple meetings and interviews with leaders and other congregation members. The same specific questions directed to different persons will expose differing perspectives. Attention to levels of blaming, reactivity, distancing, and the ability to listen to others assists in discerning the maturity of the system. Outside consultants are connected to the emotional system, but do not live in it. Although this increases the possibility of neutrality, it may lessen awareness of some aspects of the congregation. In terms of the process of helping a congregation, a consultant necessarily works at great length with congregational leaders who lead the helping process.

Whether an interim or a called pastor, a pastoral leader new to a congregation has greater access to members than does a consultant. A person in this position uses both formal and informal means of gathering data, including interviews of members and meetings directed to gathering data, as well as day-to-day conversations. While it is
recommended to ask others to develop the congregational history, a pastor new to a congregation easily and innocently can inquire about past events and patterns of dealing with challenges. A pastor of a congregation is more likely to discern levels of anxiety and reactivity than a consultant. However, as part of the congregation, he or she may find it more difficult to maintain neutrality and listen carefully to different perspectives.

Although both called and interim pastors become part of the congregational emotional system, the reality of the temporary nature of an interim pastor impacts in at least two ways. First, if the interim is in the congregation specifically to assist it to work through its difficulties before calling a new permanent pastor, the interim can be more directive in the process of assessment and in helping strategies. Usually, the congregation is eager to ‘work through this’ and get on with calling a permanent pastor. Second, because the pastor is temporary, he or she is not as important to the system and therefore may not raise anxiety levels to the degree that a called minister will. Thus, it is possible that the congregation will appear to be more functional than it is.

Although it is common for a pastor to choose or be asked to leave a congregation suffering serious difficulties, at times a pastor decides intentionally to stay in place and work toward healing. It is possible to use the process of assessment outlined here, however, it may be difficult. A pastor who has been with a congregation for a period of time has greater knowledge of the congregation’s families, leaders, and history, which is good. The same pastor, however, will have greater difficulty hearing and seeing differing
perspectives. The pastor will face the additional challenge of discerning his or her own part in the difficulties.

Congregational Assessment: Illustrations

Appendices E, F, and G include tools for the assessment of congregations. In order to illustrate this assessment process, two of the study congregations are described in light of Appendix G, the Guide for the Interpretation of Data.

A Sample Assessment: First Church

As described in Chapter 2, conflict was both the presenting problem and primary symptom of First Church. Over a period of two years the majority of its staff members had resigned, and a number of members had transferred to other congregations. The conflict had been brewing for at least two years, and much of it was focused on the pastor. Some study participants indicated that the conflict began shortly after the pastor’s arrival. It was reported by study participants that groups formed around disgruntled staff members as they left (in some cases indicating disagreement with the pastor), and simultaneously another group formed around the pastor. Polarization increased until the conflict was severe.

Although research did not include key leaders and their families, it was reported that the pastor experienced health difficulties during this period, and that these difficulties
contributed to the decision to resign. It is possible that the pastor’s health challenges could be considered a secondary symptom.

A number of stressors were identified. The majority of stressors were leadership changes. After seven years in ministry at First Church, the senior pastor accepted a call to another ministry. The associate pastor at that time stayed through the interim period and left shortly after the new senior pastor arrived. About one year after the new senior pastor’s arrival, a new associate pastor was called. Around that time, other staff members began resigning, and from that point on, changes in leadership seemed continuous.

Finances also were stressful, as the pastor and congregational board took steps toward a major building program. There was significant division over whether or not the congregation had sufficient financial stability to undertake the project.

A third stressor was the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. Although this impacted the entire country, a familial connection between a key leader of the congregation and one of the victims intensified the affect of the tragedy on the congregation as a whole, and in particular, on the pastor and board.

The primary pattern for managing anxiety in this congregation during this challenge was conflict. A secondary pattern was distancing. This was identified by research participants who reported that the pastor increasingly spent time working at home. Study of the history of the congregation revealed that the use of conflict to manage anxiety was common. Many times during its history, First Church has
experienced significant conflicts during which times members left, finances became unstable, and help was sought from outside consultants.

Yet another pattern of managing anxiety, somewhat related to the pattern of conflict, is suggested by this: First Church was chartered about fifty years before this conflict. The average tenure of its eight senior pastors over the past half-century is 5.3 years. Careful study indicates that since 1966, only one pastor has left the congregation on a fully positive note. Some participants suggested reasons for this phenomenon, such as “the judicatory doesn’t give us good choices,” “seminaries are not training pastors adequately,” and “pastors’ self-representations have been, intentionally or unintentionally, inaccurate.” Other participants suggested, “the congregation is dysfunctional; it chews up pastors and spits them out,” and “we are a loving congregation but something is wrong in the way we treat pastors.” My hypothesis is that the congregation focuses its anxiety on the pastoral office and its occupant in ways that first, place all responsibility for the wellbeing of the congregation on the pastor, and second, lessen the need for individuals and groups in the congregation to deal directly with their tension by maintaining an intense focus on the pastor. This is a move similar to parents focusing on a child in order to relieve the tension in their relationship, as described in Chapter 3.

The level of emotional reactivity in the congregation was high. Worship attendance had decreased significantly, as had participation in other activities. A number of people were distancing. Others had difficulty making eye contact. As a whole, the
congregation was intensely serious. One way to discern the emotional reactivity in a
congregation is to attempt some playfulness or humor and observe the response. Most of
my attempts at this were decidedly unsuccessful. Although there was some improvement
over the period of time I worked with the congregation, at the time I presented my final
report, emotional reactivity remained high.

In regard to resources beyond the congregation, the information I gathered at that
time is limited. The congregation’s relationship with the local judicatory was strained.
Members reported that they had requested help but had received little or none. I am
unaware of a relationship with the national judicatory, and of relationships with other
local congregations. The congregation was involved in several shared ministries in the
wider community. It was reported that relationships between members who left the
congregation and those who stayed were strained and/or cutoff. Although there were a
number of pastors in the history of the congregation, I was not aware of any continued
relationships. My guess is that as pastors left, the relationships were severed.

Needless to say, the levels of stress and emotional reactivity were very high at
First Church. In the midst of high anxiety, challenge, and reactivity it is difficult to assess
the congregation’s capacity to adapt, as well as the clarity of its self-definition. In these
situations, the best indicator of the level of differentiation of a congregation is its history.
Given the pattern of repeated conflicts at First Church, it appeared that the congregation
had limited capacity to respond gracefully to change and challenge.
There was a sign of hope, however. As part of healing and looking toward the future, in the months prior to my involvement First Church had put significant time and energy into developing a mission statement, re-instat ing and creating new programs, recruiting new leaders, and forming a call committee. Two factors related to differentiation were present: the congregation was developing a communal sense of purpose, of ‘what we are about;’ and there were leaders who looked at a broader picture and were willing to take responsibility for moving into the future. I will not assign a numerical level of differentiation to First Church, but I will admit to being hopeful at the conclusion of my time there.

I continue to observe First Church, albeit from a distance. The congregation called a new pastor within a year of this project. Attendance increased and stabilized. New connections and ministries were developed, and the congregation appears to be living out its purpose and self-definition. There has been some turnover in staff, but to my knowledge, the turnover is not related to conflict. The new pastor has been there longer than the average of 5.3 years. In accepting this call, the pastor was aware of the turmoil the congregation had experienced, as well as some of the findings of this research. From a distance, it appears to be going well.
In my introduction to Second Church, I noted that there was no, initial presenting problem. The congregation appeared to be functioning well. It was only after having been there for several months that I became aware of a number of things that might be termed ‘problematic.’ However, only by considering a number of things in conjunction with each other did I begin to identify the primary symptom of the congregation as lethargy. Lethargy impaired the functioning of the congregation by limiting its ability to change. Although lethargy is not a dramatic symptom that easily is identified, its effects can impact the life and survival of a congregation.

As with First Church, leadership changes were stressful. One fifteen-year-old in the congregation told me that he had had eight pastors since he began Sunday School. From the congregation’s organization until 1997, the average tenure of pastors was ten years. Over the next seven years, six pastors served the congregation. Two were called pastors, and four were interim pastors. One of the called pastorates was short (about one year) and marked with intense conflict.

It is important to note, however, that changes in leadership went beyond professional leaders. In some congregations there are individuals who are always there to take care of certain jobs. For the past thirty to forty years at Second Church, a group of three men had taken responsibility for all building and property needs. Each was married, and involved in the congregation as part of a family. Together, this trio of men
was central to the wellbeing of the physical structure and grounds. Two years prior to my arrival one of the men died. When I began my ministry at Second Church, the other two men and their wives were inactive.

There were stressors at Second Church. However, there were not as many as were present at First Church, nor were they as intense. Because of their longevity, however, they were in the background.

At the time I arrived, distance was the primary means of managing anxiety. As I learned more about the congregation, however, I became aware of the role played by conflict as well. Finally, I came to connect the two expressions of emotional process. In reaction to intense conflict experienced by the congregation several years earlier, (conflict which resulted in a sharp decrease in membership), members had learned to avoid and ignore differences that had the potential to provoke conflict. Distancing from one another in situations that might be anxious allowed them to avoid and ignore their differences. However, because change automatically creates differences, and differences can lead to conflict, the avoidance of conflict contributed to the lethargy and ‘stuck ‘nature of the congregation.

Distancing or drifting away is a form of emotional reactivity. The inactivity of the remainder of the property trio is somewhat reactive. I believe that the resignation of the Sunday School leaders late in the summer also was somewhat reactive (although in a polite way). In a similar way, the choice of some members not to receive communion...
when served by a member of the same-gender couple also was reactive. Although it was there, on the whole the reactivity was difficult to see. There was, however, a situation in which it became more obvious. This situation is introduced here, and revisited in the final chapter as an illustration of leadership through differentiation of self.

Prior to starting as interim pastor of Second Church, I was substitute pastor one Sunday morning. At that time, the congregation was unaware that their pastor was leaving. They also were unaware that I might serve as interim. After worship, I commented to a member that the placement of the Sharing of the Peace after Holy Communion was very unusual, and that I had found it awkward. I asked why it was at that point in the service. The response was that it was connected to their practice of holding hands for the post-communion prayer and benediction, that it was part of their identity as a close-knit congregation, and that, in the past, clergy who had asked the same question during a call process had been informed: “if you are unable to live with the placement of the peace in worship, you probably should not pursue the call further.” This congregation was twitchy about the placement of the peace, just as they were twitchy about using that time to greet and have conversation with everyone in the congregation, and just as they twitchy were about holding hands during the post-communion prayer and benediction. They were twitchy about any change to the structure of their worship service. This is an example of fairly intense reactivity.
The relationship of Second Church with the local judicatory was polite—neither close nor distant. The relationship of the congregation to the other, larger sister congregation on the other side of town was interesting. Despite friendships between clergy, and between many members of both congregations, the only shared ministries and events were the broader ecumenical projects sponsored by multiple churches in town. Second Church was deeply involved in community projects, especially those shared by a group of congregations.

There were connections between parishioners and former staff members, including pastors. It was interesting, however, that these were kept very quiet—almost secret. In Chapter 2, I noted that part of the earlier turmoil of the congregation was in response to a blessing ceremony of the same-gender couple that was held in the sanctuary. When I attempted to ascertain who presided over the ceremony, I received several different answers. After several months of inquiry I learned that a former intern of the congregation, now ordained, had conducted the ceremony.\(^{56}\) I also learned that this intern was part of a closed Bible study that continued to meet monthly at the church. This study was not on the congregational calendar, nor was I invited to it. In addition to this connection, there were some indications that my predecessor continued close friendships with several families in the congregation. My impression was that there were connections to former clergy, but there were significant efforts made to keep the

\(^{56}\) An *intern* is a seminary student working in the congregation, usually for a year, as part of the required curriculum of theological education.
connections secret. I was unable to discern whether or not there was influence back and forth. If a connection is kept secret, it is doubtful that it is one that serves as a resource for healing.

Although First Church and Second Church looked very different, I believe that their levels of differentiation were somewhat similar. Although Second Church appeared to be calm, there was significant emotional reactivity in the congregations. There were stressors, especially changes in leadership, but the intensity of the stressors was not very high. Actually, I was surprised by the very calm way in which I was accepted. In terms of self-definition, when I asked the council the questions, “why are you here?” and “what is Second Church about?,” I was directed to the Mission Statement hanging on the wall. Developed maybe a decade earlier, the statement was very eloquent and theologically sound. However, no one on the council was able to speak to it. It was “on the wall,” and my perception was that the council believed that was sufficient.

Given that blaming was not an issue at Second Church, the qualities for which one would look in potential lay leaders are somewhat different. The primary qualities important here are a broader sense of vision for the congregation, and tenacity in pursuing that vision. Although there were a number of individuals who stepped up and helped during my tenure there, and although there are many in the congregation who are committed to its survival, during my time at Second Church I did not encounter many who seemed ready to play significant leadership roles.
Assessment of a congregation is not a science, technique, or automatic formula for success. To the extent that a congregation participates in the process, it is able to begin to reflect on its purpose, functioning, and relationships. A leader of the process is able to use the assessment to make hypotheses about what will be helpful, what should be addressed at what time, and ways in which one’s functioning may be influenced. Again, an assessment is not a diagnosis. And in terms of offering a prognosis based on an assessment, the role of help must not be forgotten.

What is Help?

Whether discussing individuals, families, or congregations, the bottom line is that help is that which is on the side of life.

The Bi-polar Axis, the Immune System and Spirituality

Life seeks life. Thus, that which promotes life can be described as help or care. One way Friedman approaches the question of help is by connecting it to survival. What makes a difference in survival in a hostile environment? Friedman identifies three factors and suggests thinking of each of the factors as dials on an amplifier. The first dial represents the physical reality of a situation, the second dial is dumb luck, and the third is the response of the organism. Survival depends on the overall mix. As Friedman describes it,
Whenever the first two dials are turned all the way up in the wrong direction, the third dial will not make a difference, of course. That would be true in the case of being held under water, falling out of an airplane, exposure to radiation, and certain end-stage cases of terminal illness… But with respect to most of the crises we encounter in life, the gain in the first two dials is rarely turned up to its maximum.57

Friedman’s point is that the response of the organism is a significant factor in survival—in life.

Having established this, Friedman then presents a bi-polar graph to describe his understanding of the overall relationship between the response or reaction of the organism (R-O) and the toxicity of the environment (T-E).58 (See Figure 1.) The response of the organism (R-O) is related to differentiation. It includes self-regulation, self-definition, vision, and all other aspects of the concept. The toxicity of the environment (T-E) can be anything from societal issues, to relationship difficulties, to physical symptoms. The toxicity of the environment (T-E) is mediated by the response of the organism. In most situations, higher levels of differentiation are related to “fewer problems handling problems.”59

---

57 Friedman, A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix, 197-98.

58 Ibid., 200. This graph is presented by Friedman.

Friedman suggests plotting individuals in the different quadrants. People in Quadrant I do quite well. They are not encountering significant challenges. These individuals are more mature, and they have the capacity to respond to challenges they do encounter. In Quadrant III, there are greater challenges (greater toxicity), yet with greater maturity and differentiation, people are able to deal with them. Below the horizontal line, people in Quadrant II may not have more problems than others, but they have less maturity and capacity to respond to them. People in Quadrant IV, according to Friedman, “are off the scale. They can’t hold a job. They can’t stay in a marriage. They may be institutionalized for life…”

---

60 Ibid.
Playing with this algebraically, making T-E the numerator and R-O the denominator, (T-E/R-O), leads to interesting observations. Friedman points out that a denominator is more powerful than a numerator.

You increase the denominator just a little bit and you reduce the numerator tremendously. Whereas when you reduce the numerator a little of the same proportion you don’t wind up with as bad a situation. What is more interesting is going in the other direction. …when R-O goes toward zero, no matter how small H-E is, it takes on infinite proportions.61

What is help? Friedman suggests that promoting the response of the organism is of greater assistance than attempting to lessen the toxicity of the environment. Thus, help involves promoting a more differentiated response on the part of the organism.

Life moves toward life. Friedman points out that life does not have to be taught how to do it. Help involves discerning those processes that promote life, then working to “inhibit the inhibitors and stimulate the resources.” Friedman explains this as:

(1) Reducing the chronic anxiety that inhibits healing in emotional illness in exactly the same manner that inflammation inhibits physical healing, primarily by being a well-differentiated, non-anxious presence; and

(2) Stimulating the organism’s own resources, which means guiding or challenging the self of the client to emerge.62

61 Ibid.

Help involves inhibiting the inhibitors, that is, reducing the inflammation of anxiety through one’s calm presence and offering a framework through which the difficulties can be better understood.

Friedman offers two additional images of differentiation and the vertical axis of the bi-polar graph (R-O): the immune system and spirituality. Simply described, the immune system distinguishes \textit{self} from \textit{non-self}. If it were not for the rise of the immune response,” he suggests, “most matter on this planet would be one huge fused mass.” He continues, “in other words, the very possibility of the existential category of self may have been made possible only with the rise of an immune response, which is the capacity to recognize and distinguish what is foreign.”\textsuperscript{63} Being different-together requires maintaining self in relationship. Thus, the immune system is necessary for closeness, proximity, and love. Strengthening the immune response strengthens the capacity of the organism (family or congregation) to respond to challenges.

Friedman connects spirituality to differentiation as well. Although his development of this idea is limited, the point that is important for this project is his observation that “spirituality is not something to be implanted. It is something to be freed. It is not something you stick into people. It is something that is there and must be freed up within people or from people.”\textsuperscript{64} Friedman describes differentiation the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{63} ———, \textit{Failure of Nerve}, 179.

\textsuperscript{64} ———, "On Spirituality."
\end{flushleft}
response of the organism to challenge, as the immune response, and as spirituality. He also emphasizes that none of these can be willed or implanted.\textsuperscript{65} Willing an individual or a congregation to be and do what the pastoral leader wants does not promote the growth, spirituality, or differentiation of the individual or congregation. It is not helpful. Rather, it is an intrusive activity that diminishes the self of the other. Thus, help from this perspective involves nurturing, inviting, and possibly challenging the self of the other to emerge.

Help involves stimulating the resources of the organism, that is, guiding, challenging, and strengthening the differentiation of the congregation and its leaders.\textsuperscript{66} The stronger the ‘self’ of the congregational body, the clearer it is about its purpose, the better able it is to respond to change and challenge and to adapt in ways that promote its life as a whole, the lives of its parts and the life of the broader community. Help involves strengthening the immune system and freeing up or nurturing spirituality/differentiation.

The assessment process described above offers a picture of the congregation and the way it has functioned over time that allows identification of the congregational emotional processes, i.e., ways in which the congregation responded to and managed anxiety that actually may have exacerbated the problems. Identification of facts, in


\textsuperscript{66} Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 161.
conjunction with the theoretical framework of the Bowen/Friedman axis increases the visibility and understanding of these processes. This broad picture of the congregation allows a pastoral leader/caregiver to develop lines of inquiry that are relevant to the congregation’s developing self-definition, and to function in ways that nurture and challenge differentiation.

In Chapter 2, I offered the following working definition of pastoral care of a congregation: pastoral care is the restoring of the soul of a congregation. In light of the above discussion, I now offer a slightly revised definition: pastoral care is the freeing up of the soul of a congregation. To the extent that a pastoral caregiver works to ‘restore’ the soul of a congregation or an individual, he or she seeks to ‘implant’ that which is perceived to be lost or damaged. There is an element of willfulness. To free up the soul of a congregation recognizes the presence of the soul, or spirituality, or differentiation in the body of the faith community, and seeks to assist its emergence, as well as its strength.

**Congregational Leadership Through Differentiation of Self**

In this final section of the chapter, I consider pastoral leadership of congregations in light of differentiation, again drawing on Bowen and Friedman. Before I begin this discussion, however, it is important to clarify that, despite the use of the terms care and leadership, from the perspective of BFST and Friedman’s work on leadership, I see little
difference between the two. As Friedman describes it, “the word leader refers to mentors, healers, or managers; to parents or to presidents.”

Although Bowen did not talk about leadership of organizations, he did touch on leadership in families when he wrote about the ideal family treatment. In his epilogue to Kerr’s text, *Family Evaluation*, Bowen suggested that leadership is an important function in families, although it is not necessarily limited to the person formally identified as the family leader. Following are characteristics of a family leader, as described by Bowen:

- Possesses the courage to define self;
- Is invested in the welfare of the family at least as much as in his/her own welfare;
- Is neither angry nor dogmatic;
- Directs energy to changing self rather than telling others what they should do;
- Knows and respects the multiple opinions of others;
- Can modify self in response to the strengths of the group;
- Not influenced by the irresponsible opinions of others;
- Is beyond the popular notion of power; and
- Generates mature leadership qualities in others who are to follow.

When one family members works on differentiation—functions as a leader with these characteristics—according to Bowen, the family symptoms disappear.

---

67 ———, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 246.

In his work with congregations, clergy, organizations, and other leaders, Friedman extended this view of leadership beyond the family, emphasizing “the organic nature of their [leader and follower] relationship as constituent parts of the same organism.”\(^69\) The basic concept of *leadership through differentiation of self*, as described by Friedman, is this:

If a leader will take primary responsibility for his or her own position as ‘head’ and work to define his or her own goals and self, while *staying in touch* with the rest of the organism, there is a more than reasonable chance that the body will follow.\(^70\)

A well-differentiated leader is not one who functions in an autocratic manner, telling others what to do or coercively ordering others around. A well-differentiated leader, according to Friedman,

…has clarity about his or her own life’s goals and therefore is less likely to become lost in the anxious emotional processes swirling about. I mean someone who could be separate while still remaining connected, and therefore someone who can maintain a modifying, non-anxious, and sometimes challenging presence. I mean someone who can manage his or her own reactivity to the automatic reactivity of others and therefore be able to take stands at the risk of displeasing.\(^71\)

Friedman used the key phrase, “define self and continue to stay in touch,” to describe both differentiation and leadership.\(^72\) He was clear, however, that it is not easy.

\(^{69}\) Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 228.

\(^{70}\) Ibid., 229.

\(^{71}\) ———, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 254.

\(^{72}\) ———, *Generation to Generation*, 229.
While many leaders have the capacity to stay in touch, fewer “have the capacity to differentiate themselves, [and] fewest have the capacity to remain connected while maintaining self-differentiation.”

Friedman contrasts *Old World* and *New World* understandings of leadership. The following notions characterize the *Old World* understanding:

…that leaders influence their followers by the model they establish for identification or emulation; that the key to successful leadership is understanding the needs of their followers; that communication depends on one’s choice of words and how one articulate them; that consensus is best achieved by striving for consensus; that stress is due to hard work; and that hierarchy is about power.

In contrast, the following notions characterize the *New World* understanding:

A leader’s major effect on his or her followers has to do with the way his or her presence (emotional being) affects the emotional processes in the relationship system. A leader’s major job is to understand him- or herself. Communication depends on emotional variables such as direction, distance, and anxiety. Stress is due to becoming responsible for the relationships of others. And hierarchy is a natural systems phenomenon rooted in the nature of protoplasm.

All of these statements about leadership are grounded in the natural systems theory of behavior and human functioning developed by Bowen. Help, care, and leadership involve promoting the differentiation of the organism through the differentiation of the helper, whether the helper is identified as a caregiver, parent, or

---

73 Ibid., 230.
74 ———, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 246.
75 Ibid.
76 This is my assessment. Some faculty at the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family might disagree.
leader. In working on one’s own differentiation of self, one promotes differentiation in others. This is on the side of life, and on the side of evolution.

Before I conclude this chapter on BFST and congregations, it is necessary to return briefly to the discussion of leadership, and to the working definition of pastoral leadership offered in Chapter 2. Toward the end of that chapter, transformational leadership was introduced as leadership that “motivates followers to do more than expected.” The four factors of transformational leadership also were described: charisma or idealized influence, inspiration or inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Charisma describes leaders as strong role models for followers. Inspiration is related to the leader’s responsibility to motivate followers toward a vision. Intellectual stimulation describes leadership that stimulates creativity and innovation in followers, and individualized consideration references a supportive, listening climate.

I commented in Chapter 2 that although, at first glance, the theory of transformational leadership appears to be consonant with BFST, it is not. In light of the presentations in this chapter, it is now possible to clarify that statement. Leadership in Friedman’s thinking is an organic process in which the presence of the leader influences the emotional system. The leader is not a role model to be emulated (a common misunderstanding). That kind of understanding of leadership would, as Friedman points

---

77 Northouse, Leadership, 175-77.
out, produce clones, not growth.  

(Cloning, from this perspective, is not on the side of life and evolution.) Nor are motivation and inspiration to one’s vision the goal of leadership, in Friedman’s view. A leader who understands himself or herself to be responsible for motivating an organism or organization not only absorbs all the anxiety and responsibility for the group, but also wills the group to be and do what he or she wants them to be and do.

There is a subtlety in Friedman’s understanding of leadership that is difficult to grasp. Leadership does involve vision, and living into a vision. However, leadership does not involve motivating or inspiring or coercing others to follow that vision. It involves articulating and communicating the vision. It involves the leader living into that vision. Yet it also clearly involves the choice of anyone to ‘quit’ the leader and the vision.

Differentiation has been defined multiple times in related ways. A return to a description offered in Chapter 3 is helpful. I wrote, the concept of differentiation of self posits that it is possible, and preferable, to maintain some amount of choice as to whether one’s thinking, feeling, and acting is going to be guided solely by feelings and the deeper emotional system, without the benefit of the executive functions of the brain that permit greater objectivity and assessment of consequences of actions. Differentiation involves

---

78 Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 226.

79 Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, 176.
choices for both leaders and followers. One may choose to go along with a group for the greater good of the whole. As long as it is a choice, differentiation is involved.

The basic definition of leadership offered in Chapter 2 states: “leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.”\(^80\) The working definition of pastoral leadership offered in Chapter 2 states: pastoral leadership is a process whereby a congregational pastor (\textit{theotokos}) influences a congregation to be \textit{theotokos}, bearer of God to each other, neighbor, and the world.

Considering these definitions in light of the Bowen/Friedman axis, the primary question is in relationship to the word \textit{influence}. With clarification that \textit{influence} does not seek intentionally to inspire, motivate, or coerce, but is a process whereby the presence of the leader in the emotional system shifts the swirling emotional processes, this first half of this definition is acceptable. The second half of the definition, i.e., that which the congregation is influenced to be, is informed further by the discussion of process theology in Chapter 5, and is presented in Chapter 6.

\(^80\) Northouse, \textit{Leadership}, 3.
CHAPTER 5. A PROCESS THEOLOGY VIEW OF THE CONGREGATION, CARE AND LEADERSHIP

Introduction

Pastoral theology begins with an experience of suffering and draws on psychological and theological resources to construct theological propositions to guide care. The presentation of stories of several deeply troubled congregations in Chapter 2 raised the following theological questions:

• What is a congregation? What is its purpose and ministry?
• What is a healthy congregation?
• What diminishes health in a congregation?
• What promotes health in a congregation?
• What is the role of a clergyperson in a congregation?
• What is pastoral care for a troubled congregation?
• What is pastoral leadership for a troubled congregation?

I have answered these questions in a general way, and more specifically from the perspective of BFST. In this chapter I develop a theological framework with which to view the congregation, care and leadership.
In Chapters 3 and 4, I employed the Bowen/Friedman axis to conceptualize a congregation as a unified organism or body. I described congregational health as related to its ability ‘to be about what it is about’ in the face of challenge and change in the environment. Differentiation of self increases the capacity of a family and/or congregation to function, whereas anxiety diminishes this capacity. Although these factors provide a portion of what is necessary for this project, they are not adequate to the overall goal of developing a pastoral theology.

Implicit in the care and leadership of a congregation is the assumption that a congregation, as the people of God, has a specific purpose.¹ Pastoral care and pastoral leadership thus are related to assisting the congregation to fulfill that purpose.² Congregations unable to fulfill their purpose are in need of care. Explicit in the practice of pastoral care is the purpose of “healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling” of those “whose troubles arise in the context of ultimate meanings and concerns.”³ Explicit in the development of pastoral theology is theologically informed inquiry from the perspective of shepherding, i.e., from an attitude of tender, solicitous care.⁴ Although the Bowen/

¹ In Chapter 2, I presented two images helpful for congregations: theotokos and ‘body of Christ.’ Although these suggest purpose, they are very broad. This chapter and Chapter 6 offer more precise understandings of these images that contribute to clarification of purpose for congregations.

² Although Rabbi Friedman playfully intimated that differentiation might be “of God,” as a science of human behavior, BFST addresses neither God, nor questions of meaning and purpose Friedman, The Myth of the Shiksa.

³ Clebsch and Jaekle, Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective, 4.

⁴ Hiltner, Preface to Pastoral Theology, 20.
Friedman axis offers a starting point for this project, an adequate understanding of pastoral care and leadership of congregations also must employ theology.

It is important that the cognate and theological resources for this project share similar views of reality. Process theology and BFST share understandings of the world as related and in flux. As well, both place humanity firmly within the broad spectrum of life. I also have articulated my theological assumption that God is on the side of life. Concomitant with this assumption, in this project I seek to understand God and humans within the reality of the long evolutionary history of life, and to account for the deeply relational nature of human life.

The primary thesis of this project is that congregational care and leadership hold in common the purpose of nurturing emergence in and of the congregational body. In this chapter I will advance this thesis employing aspects of process theology, specifically Whitehead’s philosophy of organism. The work of process theologians John Cobb, David Ray Griffin, and John Haught serve to extend this interpretation. In addition to process theology, I consider several theological implications of an evolutionary phenomenon: emergence. To discuss emergence, I draw on the work of process theologian Philip Clayton.
A Shift in Perspective

The roots of process thought can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus (c. 500 BCE) and his observation that one could never step into the same river twice. In the process view of Heraclitus, change, flux, and becoming are the basis of reality. Parmenides, another Greek philosopher, offered a different view of reality: that *being* was prior to *becoming*, and that beneath every change was a more fundamental, enduring reality. These contemporaries in the ancient world proposed two very different views of reality—process and being. But only one would dominate. As Robert Mellert observes,

…Parmenides became the father of metaphysics and the basis for later Greek philosophy, while Heraclitus was largely ignored. As a result, the thrust of Greek thought, and most of Western thought thereafter, was derived from the static concepts of ‘being,’ ‘substance,’ and ‘essence,’ rather than the more dynamic concepts of ‘becoming,’ ‘process,’ and ‘evolution.’

In the nineteenth century Darwin’s evolutionary theory undercut the notion of life itself as static and unchanging. Since the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the primacy in western culture of the static, substantive worldview has encountered challenges, particularly from the fields of quantum mechanics and evolutionary theory.

Given that the understanding of reality offered in the natural sciences shapes the modern worldview, the impact of findings in the sciences have been significant and broad, reaching even into the church. Historically, the dominant worldview of each

\[\text{5 Robert B. Mellert,} \ \textit{What Is Process Theology?} \ (\text{New York: Paulist Press, 1975}, \ 12.\]
period has influenced ways in which central tenets of the Christian faith have been expressed. Just as ever-expanding understandings of the natural world have challenged contemporary worldviews and philosophies, they challenge theologians to explore different ways of thinking about God, God’s purposes, and God’s relationship to the universe.

One response to these contemporary challenges is offered in process thought. This philosophical movement began with the work of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and his primary interpreter, Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000). Born in Britain, Whitehead spent most of his professional career in mathematics. His interest in developing a philosophy of nature grew from explorations of the relationship of mathematics to the real world, and from developments in quantum physics. In 1924, at the age of 63, Whitehead retired from his professorship at the University of London and was subsequently invited to teach philosophy at Harvard. There he was free to develop his philosophical ideas and to express them in lectures.  

In 1927 Whitehead gave the prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh. From these lectures he wrote the major exposition of his philosophy, *Process and Reality*. The topic, which he identified in the first lecture, was “speculative philosophy.” This he defined as

---

…the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted. By this notion of ‘interpretation’ I mean that everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed, or thought, shall have the character of a particular instance of the general scheme. Thus the philosophical scheme should be coherent, logical, and in respect to its interpretation, applicable and adequate.7

Whitehead’s shift from substance to process and relationship parallels Bowen’s shift in focus from the individual to the family, and in this work, to the congregation. Also commensurate are the assumptions that humans are intimately related to the natural world, that the past is present in each moment, and that humans have some capacity for agency and choice.

Whitehead’s concepts have been used in many areas of enquiry, from biology to physics to cosmology, from economics to political thought, and from psychology to ethics to literary criticism. In the field of theology, his concepts have been quite fruitful. As process theologian, Gary Dorrien points out,

…for all its forbidding intellectualism, process thought as developed by John Cobb and many others is also practical, ethical, spiritual, beautiful, and at least implicitly, postmodern. Otherwise it would not be the dominant school of thought in liberal theology today...8

I use Whitehead’s metaphysics in this project because it provides a conceptual framework that allows me to address a congregation as an organism (a whole), to locate it

---


within the larger purpose of the Divine, and to account for the variable of differentiation identified by Bowen in the context of this larger purpose.

Before introducing this process view of reality it is necessary to attend to the technical nature of Whitehead’s language, or as it is sometimes called, his *jargon*. According to Whitehead, just as each science must devise and then redesign its instruments as needed, so philosophy must redesign its primary tool—language—as needed.9 Because the structure of human language is rooted in assumptions about reality, the significance of the shift in the view of reality offered in process thought easily can be lost with the use of ordinary language. The situation is similar with BFST. This means that any presentation of process thought requires a decision. Does one use the technical language, increasing the difficulty for readers new to this thinking? Or does one frame the concepts in vocabulary that, while more accessible, is less precise, and increases the possibility of misunderstandings? The nature of this particular work is fairly technical. Thus, as I did with BFST, to the extent necessary I employ the precise language developed in process philosophy. However, in light of my intention that this work be intelligible to readers without a background in process theology, I offer careful explanations of the concepts.

Finally, this project is a theological appropriation of some of Whitehead’s ideas and of the concept of emergence. By no means is it a complete presentation of any of

these ideas. Nor do I claim expertise in this very complicated view of reality. The choices, emphases, and understandings of process philosophy and emergence presented here are driven, to a great extent, by their congruencies with Bowen’s view of what he called the “human phenomenon,” and their contributions to this pastoral theology of congregational care and leadership.

**A Process Vision of Reality**

The process view of the world sees all reality as constantly in flux—as a series of instants of time called *actual entities* or *occasions of experience*. As Whitehead describes it, “time is not a single smooth flow, but comes into being in little droplets” of experience that pull droplets of events from its immediate past into a unity of experience.\(^\text{10}\) The basis of reality is not being but becoming, and that which is becoming relates to all that has come before. The central concept of Whitehead’s system, the actual entity or occasion of experience, is the basis of the process vision of reality and the beginning point of this presentation.

**Actual Entities: Prehensions and Concrescence**

The notion of organism in Whitehead’s philosophy has interconnected microscopic and macroscopic meanings. Microscopically, it describes the formal

\(^{10}\) Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, 14.
constitution of an actual entity, i.e. the process by which the unity of the occasion is achieved. Macroscopically, it describes the actual world in which we live, the world of trees, animals, people, families, and congregations.\footnote{Whitehead, \textit{Process and Reality: An Essay on Cosmology}, 128.} Although a strict separation of the two views is not feasible, I focus first on the microscopic meaning of the notion of \textit{organism}.

In Whitehead’s metaphysics, actual entities or occasions of experience are the microcosmic building blocks of the universe, and thus of reality. The term \textit{actual} designates something that is concrete that has occurred in space and time. The more temporal quality of the term \textit{occasion} indicates that the reality is a \textit{happening} or an \textit{event} in time. As does Whitehead, I use the terms \textit{actual occasion} and \textit{actual entity} interchangeably.

An actual entity is the smallest possibility actuality. It grows, matures, and perishes as one drop of experience, one instant of time. There is nothing smaller. As Whitehead describes it, “there is no going behind actual entities to find anything more real.” The one genus of actual entities includes everything, from God, to “the most trivial puff of existence in far-off empty space.”\footnote{Ibid., 18.} Thus, except for the fact that God is \textit{primordial}, which I will explain later, there is no basic difference between God and other
actualities.¹³ Through their essential interconnectedness, actual entities make up the world we see and experience.

The same process of becoming is present in all actual entities, from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic: from rocks, to vegetation, to animals, to human beings, and in this project, congregations and the Divine. An actual entity is a concrescence of prehensions, that comes into being, it is a becoming. Prehension and feeling are Whitehead’s synonymous terms for the process by which an actual entity appropriates particular elements of data from the past. Concrescence is the process by which the actual entity absorbs past events into the unity that is its drop of experience.

In process philosophy, the many influences of the past and present are the objective data that are prehended or felt by the actual entity. It is the “way in which one momentary experience incorporates or takes account of earlier such moments;” the transition of the objectivity of the past data to the subjectivity of present experience.¹⁴ As Cobb and Griffin describe it, each actual entity begins, as it were, “as an open window to the totality of the past, as it prehends all the previous occasions.”¹⁵

Whitehead uses the word concrescence to describe the unification of the multiplicity of influences or prehensions, the process by which many past events combine

---


¹⁴ John B. Cobb, "Prehension," (Philosophy Department, University of Budapest 2002).

¹⁵ Cobb and Griffin, Process Theology, 20.
into the one experience of a given actual entity. In the instant in time, everything is brought together in this new, always slightly different, actual entity. In the process of concrescence, an actual entity is a subject in that it presides over its own process of becoming. It prehends, or feels, some data, rejects others, and values some accepted data differently. Prehensions are the way in which reality is relational. They are the “vehicles by which one entity becomes objectified in another,” i.e., one entity’s feeling of others. In Whitehead’s universe, “each actual entity is conceived as an act of experience arising out of data. It is a process of ‘feeling’ the many data, so as to absorb them into the unity of one individual ‘satisfaction.”\(^{16}\)

Although an actual entity is the concrescence of prehensions, not all prehensions participate in the new unity, nor do all that do participate carry the same value. The very process of concrescence requires the elimination of portions of the past. In Whitehead’s scheme of reality, prehensions may be positive, negative, or partial. A positive prehension is datum that is felt and included by the actual entity in the concrescence process. A negative prehension is one that an actual entity excludes from the unifying process. Although negative prehensions are excluded from a particular actual entity’s concrescence, that does not mean they are without effect. As process scholar Marjorie

Suchocki points out, the absence of a prehension is significant. An example of this is the impact of secrets, or parts of a congregation’s history that are left out of its accounts.

*Satisfaction* is Whitehead’s term for the sense of completeness that comes at the end of each concrescence. With the completion, or satisfaction, of the concrescence process, an actual entity becomes an object, i.e., in the next droplet of experience it functions as a “given object for the concrescence of subsequent generations.”

The vast majority of actual entities faithfully repeat the pattern they receive from the past, which is what gives the universe overall stability. However, along with its appropriation of data from the past, an actual entity may choose to introduce novelty into its experience. That is, it may subjectively prehend past events in a new way rather than simply repeating the pattern they present. Whitehead uses the term *creativity* to describe the introduction of novelty into the process.

Whitehead’s statement, “the many become one, and are increased by one,” highlights creativity as the ultimate principle for process thought. By virtue of the diverse ways the past can be appropriated into the present, each actual entity has the potential to be different from prior occasions. Each has the potential to introduce novelty into the process. Thus, creativity also is the basis of the emergence of something new. As Whitehead describes it, creativity

---


is the universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact. It is that ultimate principle by which the many, which are the universe disjunctively, become the one actual occasion, which is the universe conjunctively. It lies in the nature of things that the many enter into complex unity.  

Creativity is what makes the world interesting.

It is continuity, however, that makes the world stable. Each actual entity has the potential to introduce novelty, yet the past continues as well. As Cobb and Griffin describe it, “there is no moment that is not constituted by its synthesis of elements of the past.”  

There is continuity. In process thought there is tension between continuity and novelty, between the continuing of the pattern and the introduction of new elements. Although the introduction of novelty always is appealing, the continuity of stable patterns is necessary for an ongoing world. In light of desire of many congregations to return to the past, and their fear of change, I place greater emphasis on creativity and novelty in this work.

All actual entities are inter-related. Each actual entity is “something for itself as well as something for the larger group of which it is a part.”  

Nothing exists simply of itself or for itself. Thus, reality is relational. Whitehead’s understanding of actual entities, prehensions, and concrescence offer a way to see that which Bowen portrays in

---

20 Ibid., 21.


his descriptions of the biological force for togetherness and the flow of anxiety. Whether individuals, families or congregations, we are inter-related.

Before moving to the next part of this discussion that focuses on the subjective aim of the actual entity, I offer a brief review of terms introduced to this point. These include:

- **Process:** Reality is not static, but is dynamic and ever changing.

- **Actual Entity or Occasion of Experience:** Reality is composed of droplets of time in which the many come together as one, and move into the next moment of time. The actual entity is the smallest building block of reality, and is an organism that grows and matures. It receives objective data from the past, subjectively appropriates this data, and then perishes across its instant of experience.

- **Concrescence:** The process in which the universe of many things acquired as past events enter into the individual unity of an actual entity. It is the growing together of the many into the unity of one.

- **Prehension or Feeling:** All past occasions of experience, as well as the current environment are prehended (or felt) as they are brought into the one. These terms describe the unification of the relations of all the experiences.

- **Positive Prehension:** An actual entity’s acceptance of a datum from the past into its concrescence process.
• **Negative Prehension:** An actual entity’s rejection of a datum from the past so that it does not enter into its concrescence process.

• **Novelty:** The capacity of each actual entity to introduce new elements in its concrescence that change the pattern of the events it has received from the past. Not every actual entity is novel; many faithfully repeat the pattern they receive. This allows for continuity.

• **Creativity:** In Whitehead’s thought, *creativity, many, and one* belong to the *category of the ultimate*. Each actual entity is an instantiation of creativity whereby “the many become one and are increased by one.”

• **Subjective Form:** This relates to how the prehension is felt, and involves valuations, emotions and purposes. Every actual entity has some degree of subjective control over how it appropriates past events.

• **Objective Form:** Once an actual entity completes is drop of experience, its subjective form perishes and it enters into the ongoing process of events as an objective datum available for appropriation by subsequent actual entities.

**Actual Entities: Subjective Aim**

In light of the preceding discussion of the actual entity, it would appear that the past and present determine the future. This is not the case. Whitehead’s concept of the *subjective aim* describes the freedom and choice available to an actual entity. Two
concepts are woven into the process explanation of freedom: the *initial aim* and the *subjective aim*. Although they are related, in this section I consider the subjective aim.

The initial aim, related to the Divine, is discussed below in the section entitled, ‘God in Process Theology.’

Whitehead’s ontological principle is stated multiple times, in varying ways. He offers one version as follows:

…every condition to which the process of becoming conforms in any particular instance has its reason *either* in the character of some actual entity in the actual world of that concrescence, *or* in the character of the subject which is in process of concrescence.\textsuperscript{23}

To cite another statement of the ontological principle: “no actual entity, then no reason.”\textsuperscript{24} By this Whitehead means that existing entities have no causes or reasons apart from the concrescence of actual entities. Outside the ongoing temporal process of events, there are no reasons for what is, or for what happens. However, given the deeply related nature of reality, within the process of events are multiple causes: “the causes are irreducibly many in kind.”\textsuperscript{25}

To this point, the discussion of prehensions and concrescence has taken account of the influence of the “character of some actual entity in the actual world of that concrescence” in the becoming of the actuality. The second phrase of the second version


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 19.

of the ontological principle cited above states that the reason for any given event also may be “in the character of the subject.” The subject, the actual event, has some degree of freedom in the shaping of the unification of its prehensions. Although the degree of freedom increases with the complexity of organisms and is most obvious in human consciousness, at some level—even if only to negate a potential prehension—self-determination is a present through all of reality.

The subjective aim of the actual entity is the ideal of what any subject (actual entity) could become, i.e., its self-selected purpose. The discussion of prehensions to this point has covered how an actual entity both receives objective data from the past and subjectively appropriates that data into its concrescence. The physical pole is Whitehead’s term for the objective side of experience, that which is derived from an external, actual world. The physical pole makes no contribution of its own, but simply receives objective data from the past. The mental pole is Whitehead’s term for the subjective side of concrescence, when an actuality makes a contribution of its own in its response to what it is given. Mentality is the actuality subjectively determining its own ideal of itself. The mental pole has to do with the process understanding of freedom.

Given language about freedom, choice, and mental poles, it is important to clarify that these are characteristics present in all actualities from actual entities to larger

---


27 Ibid., 228, 48.
societies of events. Although the relative importance of the mental and physical poles varies among different actual entities, as Whitehead writes, “no actual entity is devoid of either pole.”\textsuperscript{28} Every actual entity is dipolar, with both physical and mental poles. “Even the physical world,” according to Whitehead, “cannot be properly understood without reference to its other side, which is the complex of mental operations.”\textsuperscript{29} This does not mean that these mental operations necessarily involve consciousness, (consciousness is discussed further below).

As Cobb and Griffin explain, the subjective aim has two facets: \textit{creative self-determination} and \textit{creative self-expression}. Creative self-determination affirms the paradox that all entities are both determined and free. Although the past largely determines factors available to any actuality, through its subjective appropriation of the past, an actuality has significant degree of freedom. The second facet of the subjective aim, creative self-expression, takes into consideration the relationships that comprise an actual entity or occasion of experience. Quoting Cobb and Griffin, “…an occasion of experience in creating itself does not aim solely at its own private enjoyment; it also aims to create itself in such a way as to make a definite contribution to the enjoyment of others.”\textsuperscript{30}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[28]{Ibid., 239.}
\footnotetext[29]{Ibid., 236.}
\footnotetext[30]{Cobb and Griffin, \textit{Process Theology}, 27.}
\end{footnotes}
Enjoyment is yet another unusual idea in process thought. Whitehead frequently uses this term to describe the moment of concrescence when the multiplicity comes together as one. That an actuality experiences enjoyment suggests that there is an intrinsic value to each unit of process. Drawing again on Cobb and Griffin, “to be, to actualize oneself, to act upon others, to share in wider community, is to enjoy being an experiencing subject quite apart from any accompanying pain or pleasure.”\(^{31}\) Or, in Whitehead’s words, experience is the “self-enjoyment of being one among many, and of being one arising out of the composition of many.”\(^{32}\) The idea of creative self-determination is related to the experience of being—to actualizing oneself. The idea of creative self-expression takes into account its broader relationships. Anticipation of a positive or negative response by others to that occasion of experience will increase or inhibit the self-expression, and thereby the enjoyment of that occasion.

Given that Whitehead describes all of reality—whether human, vegetable, or rock—as units of process, it is important to clarify that enjoyment, like mentality, is not necessarily about the experience of conscious pleasure. While all actualities enjoy experience, few reach the level of consciousness and awareness of this value.

\(^{31}\) Ibid, 16-17.

Societies of Occasions and Humans

Thus far, this presentation has identified actual entities as the smallest units of reality, and has described aspects of these occasions—including prehension, concrescence, subjectivity, and subjective aim. Given that the same processes are present to one degree or another at all levels of reality, it is appropriate to apply the concepts to humans and even to congregations. In Whitehead’s scheme, there is continuity from atoms and electrons to the highest forms of life. Obviously, there are significant differences as well.

The microscopic view of organism is the actual entity. The macroscopic view of organism that is the ‘stuff’ of our everyday experience involves groupings of entities called *nexüs* (plural of *nexus*), and *societies of occasions*. The term *nexüs* describes the fact of the togetherness of entities in terms of their immediate involvement with each other through their prehensions of each other. The term *society of occasions* describes a nexus with a social order, that is, “one that exhibits characteristics in each generation of actual entities that are derived from prehensions of previous generations.” The point of a society of occasions is that it sustains itself as a recognizable pattern across time. It exhibits the *peculiar quality of endurance*. Whereas an actual event has no personal history, a society of occasions, “as a complete existence and as retaining the same


metaphysical status, enjoys a history expressing its changing reactions to changing circumstances.”

Whitehead’s discussions of nexüs and societies of occasions are complex, and include extensive descriptions of the hierarchy of societies and sub-societies that, for the most part, are not relevant to this project. What is relevant here is that in Whitehead’s view, all living organisms are societies of events, and that the process of becoming is the same throughout the universe.

For this project, it is important to review Whitehead’s understanding of life in general and human life in particular. The philosophy of organism covers the whole of reality, all organic and inorganic entities. The distinction between organic and inorganic is less clear in process thought than in general thinking, but lies in the involvement of the mental pole of the occasion. Inorganic substances are comprised of nexüs of actual events that simply feel the past (physical pole) and typically pass it on ‘as is.’ According to Whitehead, “inorganic entities are vehicles for receiving, for storing in a napkin, and for restoring without loss or gain.” Inorganic entities fall below the process definition of life.

---


37 Any actual entity has a degree of freedom, and even one within an inorganic substance can introduce some minimal novelty, such as the radiation from a rock formed by the splitting off of single electrons from its atoms. In general, however, inorganic nexüs primarily continue existing patterns.
Organic actualities on the other hand, are regarded as living. For Whitehead, the primary meaning of life is the presence of purposeful conceptual novelty. As he writes, “the essence of life is the teleological introduction of novelty, with some conformation of objectives.” No single occasion of experience can be considered to be living; only societies of occasions can possess life. It is the coordination of mental spontaneities through the actualities of a society that constitute life.

A human being is a highly complex living society comprised of intertwining, diverse nexü, societies, and sub-societies. Although Whitehead considered all higher animals (all larger than one cell) to be conscious at some level, humans appear to be unique in that they are more complex than other animals and possess a high grade of conscious mentality. A human may be described as a personal society because it includes one dominant strain of events that has great influence on the whole of the body. The living body of a person is comprised of “many living societies of low-grade occasions so far as mentality is concerned.” A low-grade occasion is marked by little novelty. The whole structured society of a person, however, is coordinated to support a personal living society of high-grade occasions; moreover, those occasions are marked by a high level of introduction of novelty. This personal society then dominantly influences the whole of the body or living society. Simply put, a human being is comprised of multiple,

38 Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 266.

39 Ibid., 266-67.
intertwined systems with one dominant element. The primary distinction between
humans and other animals appears to be the presence of a personal living society or
presiding personality (which Whitehead describes as the person’s soul) that has some
capacity to influence the rest of the body.

According to Whitehead, the presiding occasion or personality, “if there be one, is
the final node, or intersection of a complex structure of many enduring objects. Such a
structure pervades the human body.” He continues by describing how the person’s soul
creates continuity of personal experience throughout the body and across time:

The harmonized relations of the parts of the body constitute this wealth of
inheritance into a harmony of contrasts, issuing into intensity of experience. The
inhibitions of opposites have been adjusted into the contrasts of opposites. The
human mind is thus conscious of its bodily inheritance. There is also an enduring
object formed by the inheritance from presiding occasion to presiding occasion.
This endurance of the mind is only one more example of the general principle on
which the body is constructed. This route of presiding occasions probably
wanders from part to part of the brain, dissociated from the physical material
atoms. But central personal dominance is only partial, and in pathological cases
is apt to vanish.40

Although consciousness is an aspect of the personal living society, the functioning
of the personal living society is not primarily conscious.

Consciousness flickers; and even at its brightest, there is a small focal region of
clear illumination, and a large penumbral region of experience which tells of
intense experience in dim apprehension. The simplicity of clear consciousness is
no measure of the complexity of complete experience. Also this character of our

experience suggests that consciousness is the crown of experience, only occasionally attained, not its necessary base.\textsuperscript{41}

Whitehead’s descriptions in the last two quotations are of humans, however, they also offer ways to think about congregations. A congregation that is functioning well has harmonized relations of the parts of the body, so that the inheritance of multiple societies of occasions (members and families) produces an intense harmony of contrasts. The central personal dominance does not lie in any one individual (even the clergyperson) but probably ‘wanders’ through the leadership of the body. Although Whitehead suggests that in pathological cases, the central personal dominance is apt to vanish, I suggest that the disappearance of the central personal dominance of the congregation is a major contributor to pathology.

Although it is a little more of a stretch, I believe that it is possible to think of congregations as having consciousness as well. In a congregational body there is much intense experience that never reaches the level of awareness. This is similar to Bowen’s idea that much of human behavior is driven by the emotional system, far below the level of consciousness.

Here I summarize significant process concepts covered in this section:

- \textit{Subjective aim}: The purpose or goal of an actual entity that governs what the entity will become.

\footnote{\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 267.}
• Creative self-determination: The facet of the subjective aim that describes the freedom of the entity, within some limits, to set its own direction.

• Creative self-expression: The facet of the subjective aim that describes the influence of relationships and the potential outcome of the entity’s choices, on the direction.

• Enjoyment: Related to prehension, the intrinsic value of the many becoming one.

To this point the discussion has considered a process view of reality from the perspective of the actual entity or occasion of experience, societies of occasions, human persons, and a congregation. In addition to these elements, Whitehead’s metaphysics includes the Divine. Postponement of the discussion about God thus far has been influenced by two factors: first, the basic complexity of process thought even without inclusion of the role of God, and second, my intention in this project to focus closely on God and God’s role in the universe. As I shift focus to God in process thought, it is important to point out that some seemingly unfinished and poorly clarified aspects presented in recent pages will become clearer in light of the following consideration of the Divine and process thought.
A Process Vision of God

Although the role of the Divine in this vision has received little attention to this point in the discussion that is not to say that the Divine is not involved. Whitehead’s project as a philosopher was not to articulate an understanding of the world in light of the reality of an assumed Divine. However, in articulating his understanding of the world—the exhaustive descriptions of the becoming and passing away of actual entities and ways in which entities unite and interpenetrate—Whitehead determined that God is the final factor needed “to make the system conform to observed experience and provide an explanation for its stability and directionality.”

42

God, in Whitehead’s system, is an actual entity. God, in fact, is “the one necessary entity within the system.”43 Thus, the principle of creativity, the process of concrescence, prehending and feeling—all aspects discussed above in relationship to actual entities—also apply to the Divine. As Whitehead writes, “God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification.”

44

Rooted in the assumption that God is on the side of life, this section looks at the Divine in light of process thought. It is organized into four sections. The first introduces


43 Ibid., 12.

the panentheistic concept of God; the second introduces the concept of beauty as the telos of the Divine. The third and fourth sections look at the understanding of evil in process thought, and the response of God to the reality of the universe.

Panentheism

Although Whitehead concluded that God is the one entity necessary within the system, his work with this understanding of God and the implications of it was minimal. Philosopher of religion, Charles Hartshorne is credited with developing Whitehead’s process philosophy into process theology. Hartshorne identified the process concept of God as panentheism, and synthesized aspects of Whitehead’s thought and vocabulary into his significant expansion of this understanding of God.45 Although my primary source is the work of Whitehead, any discussion of panentheism must begin with an acknowledgment of Hartshorne’s work.

Panentheism, as defined in the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, is

…the belief that the Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in Him, but (as against Pantheism) that His Being is more than, and is not exhausted by, the universe.46

45 The result of the influence of Hartshorne’s thinking on faculty and students during his long tenure at the University of Chicago Divinity School, as noted by Cobb and Griffin, “has been that, in many respects, process theology has been as much Hartshornean as Whiteheadian.” Cobb and Griffin, Process Theology, 167.

46 F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 1027. Note, one of the five common understandings of God rejected by Cobb and Griffin is that of God as male. Unfortunately, this dictionary definition does not reflect the contemporary practice of avoiding traditional male imagery.
Panentheism combines features of pantheism, which regards God as immanent (i.e., the world is God), and theism, which traditionally regards God as transcendent. At the same time, it differs from pantheism that does not allow for interaction between God and the world (given that there is no distinction), and it differs from many of the traditional theistic assumptions that God is unaffected by the world. Panentheism offers a model of God as both immanent and transcendent, as well as both affecting and being affected by the world. The universe is within God, yet God is more than the universe. Although there are different understandings of panentheism, according to theologian Niels Gregersen, the broadest notion of it includes at least two elements: First, the world is somehow “contained in God,” and second, there will be some “return” of the world into the life of God.47

In process thought, God is an actual entity, intimately related to the universe, and to all actual entities. As an actual entity, the Divine both influences and is influenced by the actual world. The idea of bilateral relations between God and the world is a distinction of panentheism, but in Whitehead’s work the Divine takes on the additional concepts of having two natures: consequent and primordial. The consequent nature of God is impacted by events in the world and changes over time. The primordial nature of God is eternally consistent.48


God’s consequent nature is responsive and is directly related to all actual entities of the universe. This is God’s physical pole, the aspect that feels all actual occasions in the temporal world. Just as occasions of experience prehend past entities, so the consequent nature of the Divine prehends all entities. The universe becomes a part of God. God’s consequent nature is “the part of God that results from the decisions of all other entities.”

God is affected and changed by the universe. Joy, suffering, violence, creativity, community, pain—it all is felt in this concrete essence of the Divine.

God’s primordial nature is the place of all possibilities, and the source of creativity as well as of order in the universe. Whitehead refers to these possibilities as eternal objects. God offers these novel possibilities as consistent with God’s intention for creation—ongoing creativity and greater beauty. The creative work of the Divine is centered in the idea that for each actuality, whether it be a singular actual entity or a complex society of events—God provides an initial aim. Whitehead uses this term to designate any actuality’s impulse “to actualize the best possibility open to it, given its concrete situation.” God’s initial aim does not automatically become the actuality’s subjective aim. Although the actuality can choose to actualize other possibilities, according to Whitehead, God lures each actuality toward fulfilling the Divine initial aim.

Or as Cobb and Griffin describe it, “God seeks to persuade each occasion toward that possibility for its own existence which would be best for it.”

Although God is an actual entity, there is a difference between the Divine and other actualities of the universe. The primordial nature of God is atemporal. While the consequent nature is shaped by relationship, the primordial nature remains consistent, with all possibilities that contribute to the Divine purpose of creativity and beauty. God feels all, is impacted by all, and responds to all, yet the character of God as creative love luring creation toward greater beauty is not changed. It remains constant.

In the view of process theism, God is the chief exemplification of all metaphysical principles. Thus, just as is the case for all entities, God is in the process of becoming. God’s consequent nature is intimately related to the world—the world is in God, and God is in the world. The consequent nature of God relates with and responds to all creation. Yet, God is more than the universe. The primordial nature of God exists outside the world as the source of creativity, order, and novel possibilities for all actualities in the universe.

Beauty and Emergence

Central to this project is the understanding that ‘what God is about’ is the luring of creation toward ever increasing beauty. Whitehead borrowed from aesthetics the

50 Cobb and Griffin, Process Theology, 53.

concept of beauty to describe an occasion of experience that fulfills the criteria of harmony, intensity and enjoyment.\textsuperscript{52} Closely related to beauty is the concept of \textit{emergence}, a new phenomenon that arises from the complexity of beauty. It is helpful to begin with a description of the building blocks of beauty and emergence: the reality of increasing complexity, the enjoyment of an actual entity, and the relationship of harmony and intensity in enjoyment.

Before entering this discussion, however, I want to clarify that my use of the term \textit{emergence} is not related to the recent phenomenon identified as the \textit{emerging church} or \textit{emergent church}. For clarity of this, I provide a short overview of this contemporary movement in Appendix H, \textit{The Emerging Church}.

In the metaphysics of process thought, reality is in flux and ever changing. Each unit of reality—each actuality—presupposes a multiplicity of influences from its past, which it creatively appropriates so that “the many become one and are increased by one.”\textsuperscript{53} Central to Whitehead’s metaphysics is the reality of ever increasing complexity and creativity. Process theology understands the direction of evolution toward more complex actualities as the result of “…God’s basic creative purpose, which is the evocation of actualities with greater and greater enjoyment.”\textsuperscript{54} Whitehead uses the term \textit{enjoyment} to describe the intrinsic value present in the moment of concrescence. The

\textsuperscript{52} Cobb and Griffin, \textit{Process Theology}, 65.


\textsuperscript{54} Cobb and Griffin, \textit{Process Theology}, 64.
degree of enjoyment—the value present—in the actual entity is not the same from entity to entity. Differences in the amount of enjoyment are determined by two variables: harmony and intensity.

In music, harmony consists of a grouping of pitches sounded simultaneously in a combination that is pleasing, not discordant. Similar to music, in order to be enjoyable, experiences must be basically harmonious; “the elements must not clash so strongly that discord outweighs harmony.” However, in order to be enjoyable, experiences also require some amount of intensity, or difference. Drawing on Cobb and Griffin again,

Without intensity there might be harmony, but the value enjoyed will be trivial. Intensity depends upon complexity, since intensity requires that a variety of elements be brought together into a unity of experience.

God’s purpose is the evocation of greater enjoyment. Enjoyment requires adequate degrees of harmony and intensity. The greater the complexity of an actuality, the greater its potential for intensity as it takes into itself more elements. Thus, the building blocks of beauty, harmony and intensity, and higher grades of enjoyment presuppose some degree of complexity.

Beauty in an occasion of experience involves mutual adaptation of the several factors. The quality of adaptation determines the form of beauty, minor or major, as well as its strength. The minor form of beauty is produced when a lack of mutual inhibition

---

55 Ibid., 61.
56 Ibid., 65.
among the prehensions exists, and intensities of the various objectifications are able to be maintained in the new unity. The major form of beauty presupposes the absence of mutual inhibitions, and adds to it the requirement of enough contrast among the prehensions that the new synthesis itself introduces new contrasts.\(^{57}\) The need for both harmony and intensity in the concept of beauty is discussed further in the section on evil.

What is God about? Complexity, harmony, intensity, and enjoyment are descriptive of Whitehead’s concept of beauty. As Whitehead describes it, “beauty is the internal conformation of the various items of experience with each other, for the production of maximum effectiveness.”\(^{58}\) The teleology of the universe, according to Whitehead, “is directed to the production of Beauty.”\(^{59}\)

Beauty is the *harmony of contrast*, and the *ordering of novelty*. It is “a fragile balance of form and content, or a combination of unity and multiplicity.”\(^{60}\) In my own words, beauty is the greatest diversity that can be held together without falling into chaos and violence, or into homogeneity.\(^{61}\) What God is about in the cosmos is maximizing beauty.

---

\(^{57}\) Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 324.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 341.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 341.


\(^{61}\) John Haught, in an email conversation, indicated this to be an understanding of *beauty* consistent with Whitehead’s use of the term.
Increasing complexity and movement toward beauty are built into the universe. However, in the history of the universe, occasionally and spontaneously something new and surprising has emerged, something with qualities that, according to philosopher Paul W. Davies, “cannot, at least in any straightforward manner, be attributed to known properties of the constituents.”

Biologist and philosopher Harold Morowitz identifies twenty-eight emergences over the billions of years of history of the universe, beginning with the fact that there is a universe at all. Naming and explaining all twenty-eight is beyond the task of this work. However, some that are more familiar are the emergence of life in the form of prokaryotes, the emergence of eukaryotes with nuclei, multicellular organisms, vertebrates, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, primates, hominids, toolmakers, philosophy, and the spiritual.

I draw on the work of philosophical theologian Philip Clayton to make my point for this work:

…that new and unpredictable phenomena are naturally produced by interactions in nature; that these new structures, organisms, and ideas are not reducible to the sub-systems on which they depend, and that the newly evolved realities in turn exercise a causal influence on the parts out of which they arose.

---


64 Ibid., 25-27. Although Morowitz does not name “consciousness” other scholars do.

65 Clayton, Mind and Emergence: From Quantum to Consciousness, vi.
There are times in movement toward beauty when increasing complexity produces something new and unexpected. Although movement toward beauty always includes novelty and creativity, I use the term emergence on a much smaller scale to describe those instances in congregations when there is an element of surprise. Further, drawing on the latter phrase in Clayton’s description, I use the term emergence to describe instances in which the new, surprising realties then influence the parts from which they arose.

Although my use of the term is metaphorical, in application of process thought to congregations, care, and leadership, the concept of emergence in conjunction with the telos of beauty offers the possibility of a serendipitous surprise that then can influence the functioning of the congregation as a whole. This is discussed further in Chapter 6.

Evil: Opposition to God’s Purpose

The maximization of beauty requires the greatest intensity possible for an actuality, given its context. It entails the “mutual adaptation of the several factors in an occasion of experience.” Haught describes the risk involved in God’s telos as follows:

It is an essential mark of the aim toward beauty that it will have to risk disorientation as the price of intensification. Beauty brings with it a fragility that makes it vulnerable to either excessive monotony on the one side or destructive chaos on the other.

---

66 Whitehead, Adventures of Ideas, 324.

67 Haught, God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution, 135.
Although the maximization of beauty and emergence are aesthetically pleasing visions, one must acknowledge the reality of evil in the world. In some occasions, the disjunction of elements is more prominent than the harmony of their conjunction, *discord* takes precedence over harmony and the mutual destructiveness of the elements is felt.\(^{68}\) In other occasions, actualities experience a greater conjunction or harmony of the elements. However, the harmony may occur simply because there is little difference or disjunction between the elements, i.e., there is not much to harmonize. The result is a lack of intensity, for which Whitehead uses the word *triviality*.

These situations, discord and triviality, describe two forms of evil in process thought. Triviality is evil when an actuality misses the possibilities that were open to it. Discord, or the inability of an actuality to harmonize disparate elements, may cause is mental or physical suffering, and “is simply evil in itself, whenever it occurs.”\(^{69}\)

One example of discord is violence. Considered in light of process thought, violence involves an inability to manage disjunction or difference, and the use of force and power to resolve the differences. Although use of force and power can lead to chaos and disintegration, it also has the potential to eliminate differences to the extent that the only option is homogeneity and triviality.


\(^{69}\) Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, 70.
Variations in the degree of discord are influenced by several factors, including the intensity of the pain, as well as the degree to which the subjective aim integrates the initial aim in the process of concrescence. Said another way, the discord may be experienced as less intense if a society of events such as a human person realizes that it can integrate the disparate factors into a desired future.

When there is little contrast or difference among prehensions in an actuality, there is little intensity. With little intensity, harmony is dominant and there is some enjoyment. However, if the occasion is more trivial and less intense than it could have been, “given the real possibilities open to it,” it is also considered evil.\(^{70}\) As Whitehead describes it, actualities can fail to conform to the Divine aim for them, and “so far as the conformity is incomplete, there is evil in the world.”\(^{71}\)

In his biography of Whitehead, Victor Lowe tells a story that clarifies this somewhat unusual idea of evil. While at Cambridge, Whitehead belonged to an exclusive debate club known as ‘The Cambridge Apostles.’ The group met on a regular basis to discuss various philosophical and theological questions. At the end of the evening, each participant voted ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in response to the evening’s question. The question up for debate one evening was, “does the devil exist or is he merely loathsome?” Following energetic discussion, Whitehead was one of only two members who answered “Yes, the

\(^{70}\) Ibid., 71.

\(^{71}\) Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 60.
devil exists.” According to Lowe, the note Whitehead wrote in the society’s book that evening was that “He [the devil] is the Homogeneous.” Whitehead’s philosophical view was that “a state of affairs without concrete differences to cherish is abhorrent.” 72 Although triviality is only comparatively evil, what it holds in common with discord is the prevention of the maximization of enjoyment—the one intrinsic good.

As Cobb and Griffin explain, in order to be loving and moral, God’s aim must be twofold: “to overcome unnecessary triviality while avoiding as much discord as possible.” God’s aim is for “the perfection of experience. Perfection is the maximal harmonious intensity that is possible for a creature, given its context.” 73

An important tension bears noting before shifting attention to how the Divine works in this process. If God’s purpose is the maximization of enjoyment or beauty, and beauty is the “harmony of contrasts,” there is always a risk of discord. The delicate synthesis of beauty “places conflicting elements within limits that soften the contradictions without erasing differences.” 74 It requires the resolution of clashes and disjunctions into interesting arrangements that confine the variety without destroying it.

In all actualities, and especially visible in human relationships, every movement from triviality to more intense beauty risks going though what Whitehead calls the


73 Cobb and Griffin, Process Theology, 71.

74 Haught, God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution, 131.
“halfway house of chaos.” Through this halfway house, there is the potential that disharmony or chaos of an actuality might, in a broader vision, “become an intriguing shade that enhances the whole instead of a conflict that destroys it.”

The discussion above suggests that while God’s aim is to avoid both unnecessary triviality and discord, it is inaccurate to assume that God’s aim is the complete avoidance of discord. As Cobb and Griffin point out, if the avoidance of discord were the only concern of the Divine, “God would have abstained from creating the world—which would be the only guarantee of its absence.” Although it must be acknowledged that much discord is unnecessary and can lead to evil, if creation is to increase in complexity and respond to the Divine’s lure toward beauty, some amount of it appears to be a necessary factor.

Whitehead uses the Greek civilization’s pursuit of the ideal of perfection as to show that no single perfection that is achieved can be held through time. Greek civilization attained great beauty in its art, theoretic sciences, modes of life, literature, schools of philosophy, and religious rituals. Yet, with repetition of the same things in subsequent generations, the freshness of the beauty gradually vanished. The “ardour of adventure” was replaced with learning, he writes. Not even perfection is able to “bear the

75 Ibid., 134.
76 Ibid., 131.
77 Cobb and Griffin, Process Theology, 70.
tedium of indefinite repetition." New perfections are achieved only through the increase of intensity in the process of harmonization, and increase in intensity involves discord. The willingness to risk and experience discord is the foundation of progress and adventure.

Before moving to consider how God responds to evil, it is important to emphasize the breadth of Whitehead’s view of time, and of God over time. Whitehead’s metaphysics encompasses the 14-plus billion-year history of the universe. It is a macrocosmic perspective. Simultaneously, however, Whitehead focuses on the smallest instants of time—a microcosmic perspective. The macrocosmic perspective informs the microcosmic, and vice versa. My use of these concepts and understandings lies somewhere in-between, and similar to Whitehead’s philosophy, is speculative.

How Does God Respond? The Lure of the Divine

How does the Divine respond to that which inhibits the maximization of beauty? In process thought, God responds to evil—whether discord or triviality—the way God responds to all occasions, i.e., by prehending all occasions and offering to the new occasion an ideal opportunity for its self-satisfaction or enjoyment. Evil, whether discord or triviality, is prehended—is absorbed by the Divine. The initial aim provided by God to

78 Whitehead, Adventures of Ideas, 321-32.
each actual entity is an impulse felt by the occasion “to actualize the best possibility open to it, given its concrete situation.”

The dipolar nature of God was discussed earlier. The consequent nature of God, the physical pole, feels all actual occasions in the temporal world andprehends all entities. The Divine “enjoys our enjoyments and suffers with our sufferings.” The world affects God. The universe is in God. As Whitehead asserts, “there is no loss, no obstruction. The world is felt in a unison of immediacy.”

In process thought the Divine initial aim is God’s subjective aim. Whitehead’s description of the feeling of the world, and the response of God’s subjective aim is worth quoting at length. He wrote:

The wisdom of [God’s] subjective aim prehends every actuality for what it can be in such a perfected system – its sufferings, its sorrows, its failures, its triumphs, its immediacies of joy – woven by rightness of feeling into the harmony of the universal feeling, which is always immediate, always many, always one, always with novel advance, moving onward and never perishing. The revolts of destructive evil, purely self-regarding, are dismissed into their triviality of merely individual facts; and yet the good they did achieve in individual joy, in individual sorrow, in the introduction of needed contrast, is yet saved by its relation to the completed whole. The image—and it is but an image—is that of a tender care that nothing is lost.

The consequent nature of God also is God’s judgment on the world. As the world passes into the immediacy of the consequent nature of the Divine, there is “the judgment

---

79 Cobb and Griffin, Process Theology, 53.


81 Ibid., 346.
of a tenderness which loses nothing that can be saved,” as well as “the judgment of a wisdom which uses what in the temporal world is mere wreckage.” But God’s saving of the temporal world is not mere preservation. It also is the potential for transformation. Into each occasion of experience the Divine offers possibilities for the greatest immediate enjoyment for the occasion and for the subsequent related occasions. God’s purpose of maximizing enjoyment and beauty remains, even in the reality of discord and triviality.

The way in which God relates to the world, offering potentialities for greater enjoyment, is, perhaps, one of the most significant contributions of process thought to the conception of God. It is not within the nature of God to determine the response of the creature or actual entity. Always, there is choice of whether or not to prehend the conceptual feeling that is the initial aim. Therefore, God is understood as working through gentle persuasion, or as luring creation toward ever more intense beauty. And thus, creation participates—or does not. When creation does not participate, when triviality and discord reign, into those moments God again offers potential for what might be considered healing—movement toward greater value. In this theistic view, God does not force or coerce. In loving relationship, God prehends the pain, conflict, violence, triviality of the world—as well as the joy, creativity, and wonder. God does not distance from that which is difficult, but maintains relationship and presence, always with the possibility of greater harmony and intensity and the maximization of beauty.

---

82 Ibid., 346.
Before bringing this introduction of process theology to a close, and turning to consider congregations, care, and leadership in light of it, it is important to consider the relationship of humans and God. The entire universe is in relationship with the Divine. For Whitehead, all actualities, even actual entities in the drop of experience, respond (or not) to the Divine lure. As complexity increases, so does the capacity for self-determination or freedom, i.e., the capacity to choose to respond or not to respond. Concurrent with this increase is an increase in the capacities for intrinsic and instrumental good, as well as the capacities for intrinsic and instrumental evil. With a significant degree of freedom, humans have the capacity for great good as well as great evil. Human freedom to respond or not to God’s initial aim is real.

The questions “What is God?,” “What is God about?,” and “What gets in the way of what God is about?,” and “How does God respond?,” have shaped the discussion in this section of the chapter. God is relationship, possibilities, creativity and grace. God is about luring creation forward into ever increasing complexity, beauty, and surprise. In response to the evil that resists movement toward beauty, whether discord and destruction or triviality, the Divine continually lures creation toward beauty and ongoing creativity. The future is open. The whole universe participates in its ongoing creation. This has been the case over the history of the universe. For those who share this view of the

---

Divine, intentional discernment of and response to God’s lure toward beauty and emergence is what life is about.

**Congregations, Care, and Leadership through a Process Lens**

A congregation is a human community that shares basic assumptions about God, and about life in the world in relationship to God. The way a congregation thinks about the Divine shapes the way it lives in the world, i.e., what it is about. Based on the understanding that the health of a congregation is related to its ability ‘to be about what it is about,’ in the face of challenge and change, both assessment and healing of a congregational body require clarity of what the congregation is about.

Looking at congregations through the lens of BFST in the last two chapters, I identified ways in which anxiety contributes to increasing intensity and troubles in congregations. I also identified ways in which the presence and being of a clergy leader working on differentiation of self can lessen anxiety and help promote better functioning. Although differentiation is a process that appears to contribute to life, and to an extent, might be considered that which a congregation is about, (at least insofar as it is helpful to their functioning), I am unable to make connections between working on differentiation as the congregation’s purpose, and more traditional understandings of a congregation’s call to be the body of Christ, and to love neighbor, self and the world.
Whitehead’s identification of the *telos* of the universe as maximizing beauty—the harmony of contrasts, multiplicity in unity, and the greatest complexity that can be held together without falling into chaos, violence, or homogeneity—is the theological context for Bowen’s concept of differentiation. The process of being different-together is required for a response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and emergence. Thus, to work on differentiation—whether as a healing or leadership phenomenon—is to respond positively to the lure of the Divine. This is discussed further in Chapter 6.

Care requires a conceptualization of health as well as a conceptualization of that which diminishes health. Although Whitehead does not speak of health and care directly, the teleology of maximizing beauty with its requirements of intensity and harmony, in conjunction with his understanding of evil as that which prevents the maximization of beauty imply a functioning understanding of both health and care. Health involves the capacity to respond to God’s lure, i.e., to be self-in-relationship with other selves. Care involves promoting that capacity. This also is discussed further in Chapter 6.

Finally, what about leadership? Again, Whitehead does not speak directly of leadership. However, the way in which the Divine relates to creation is, to me, a theologically faithful way to think of leadership. God does not coerce, but lures. God is graceful, always offering new possibilities. God is always in relationship. Although human leadership can be but a pale reflection, this offers a way to think about pastoral leadership as well as pastoral care.
CHAPTER 6. NURTURING EMERGENCE: A PASTORAL THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF CONGREGATIONAL CARE AND LEADERSHIP

Introduction

The central task of this pastoral theology of congregational care and leadership is to develop a constructive articulation of nurturing emergence. I have described beauty as the increasing complexity and diversity of life held in unity, and the mutual care and acceptance integral to that process in a congregational body. I have offered a preliminary definition of emergence as the appearance of new phenomena arising from the interactions of the community which are reflective of the ongoing composition of beauty. I have posited movement toward beauty and emergence in and of the congregation that is nurtured by a clergyperson whose presence and being is shaped by a process of differentiation. In this chapter, I bring together concepts of the Bowen/Friedman axis with process theology to develop and deepen the idea of nurturing emergence as that which is common to pastoral care and leadership of congregations, and to offer theological propositions to guide care and leadership of troubled congregations.

In the first part of the chapter, the idea of concrescence is used as an analog for the connections of theology and BFST. In the second part I introduce six newly-
constructed theological propositions. In Chapter 7, these proposals serve as underlying principles guiding further consideration of care and leadership of the study congregations. The third part of the chapter offers a description of a *healthy, emerging congregation*, and a constructive articulation of pastoral care and leadership as *nurturing emergence*.

**Theology and Theory: A Process of Concrescence**

*In one sense, Science and Philosophy are merely different aspects of one great enterprise of the human mind.*

*Adventure of Ideas*, Whitehead

There are remarkable congruencies between the worldviews developed by Whitehead and Bowen. The following are points on which they agree: Everything is interconnected, therefore everything is mutually influential. Humans are products of evolution and as such are related to all of life. A human being is comprised of multiple organic subsystems and is connected to multiple systems. Because organisms are comprised of relationships, an individual cannot be understood outside of relationship. The past is always in the present. Individuals have some capacity for choice. The future is somewhat open, although the extent of that openness is related to the strength of the influence of the past and the capacity for choice. Differences are to be welcomed, not feared. Problems are related to responses to differences between people or entities. The language, terminology, and foci of Whitehead and Bowen vary, but the connections between the worldviews easily are drawn. The congruency of their worldviews allows
them to be brought together in ways that enrich both BFST and process thought, and that are significant for the use of BFST in pastoral care and leadership of congregations.

A central concept of Whitehead’s process metaphysics is concrescence: the process of unification by which the many become one. I use the idea of concrescence analogically, drawing together several of the concepts to build a foundation for a model of congregational care and leadership. Although all past data are prehended in the process of concrescence, some are prehended negatively, i.e., they are ignored. Not every datum presented by the past is appropriated by the actual event. Likewise, not every datum presented in BFST and process thought is appropriated in the new entity arising in this process. Some aspects of each are prehended, and other aspects of each are ignored. Although the new entities that arise through the process of concrescence vary in intensity and value, they all have the potential to introduce novelty, and to offer helpful and creative ways of thinking about congregations, care, and leadership.

A significant impetus for this project is the challenge of bringing together a BFST conceptualization of the human phenomenon in relationship to congregations with traditional assumptions about God, and the life of congregations and their members in the world in relationship to God. Although many clergy find BFST (in particular, Friedman’s work with the theory) to be descriptive of congregational life and intuitive, some underlying assumptions of BFST are not congruent with some traditional Christian theological assumptions.
The phrase, “the way one thinks about a phenomenon governs the way one addresses it” has been used several times. BFST thinks about humans as part of a long evolutionary process. It assumes that human thinking, feeling, and behavior are determined significantly and constantly by the emotional system and relationship systems, and that ongoing work on differentiation of self is helpful for self and for others. To the extent that traditional Christian theology thinks about both creation (including *Homo sapiens*) and the Divine as static, unchanging, self-contained substance, there are significant disjunctions between traditional theology and BFST. Differentiation is integral to the evolution of complex life. If a congregational leader does not see increasing complexity as related to the purpose of the Divine, the use of BFST as a primary lens on the human phenomenon may not be wise.

Traditional Christian understandings of the Divine and some underlying assumptions of BFST are discordant elements. One of the ways two discordant elements may be brought together, according to Whitehead, is through the addition of a third, seemingly unrelated element through which a harmonious synthesis between the first two elements can be achieved.\(^{84}\) The process view of reality and panentheistic conceptualization of the Divine provide this third element through which it is possible to achieve a rich synthesis of a Christian doctrine of God and BFST, a synthesis helpful to clergy and congregations. In this synthesis of process theology and BFST, differences in

\(^{84}\) ———, *Adventures of Ideas*, 335.
human functioning are located within a broad theological framework that supports the correlation of help, i.e., differentiation of self, with God’s purpose in creation. Thus, the BFST goals of help are consistent with the larger purpose of the Divine, and with the purposes of congregations as they seek to be *theotokos*, to embody the love of God.

Once a synthesis of BFST and God as conceptualized in process theology is achieved, it is possible to consider other ways in which specific ideas can be brought together. Bowen’s concept of differentiation of self and Whitehead’s concept of beauty come together to offer the central tenet underlying this dissertation: Differentiation is a process, built into creation, by which the Divine lures creation toward beauty. Movement toward beauty is an ongoing process toward ever increasing complexity and intense harmony. Differentiation is an ongoing process of defining self in relationship. Complexity consists of a multiplicity of selves held in unity. The teleology of beauty clarifies the direction toward which increasing differentiation moves. Differentiation is a way in which humans are able to respond to the lure toward beauty. It is both healing and creative.

The concrescence of Bowen’s descriptions of automatic processes by which anxiety is managed (i.e., distance/drifting away, conflict, adaptation and overfunctioning to preserve harmony, and projection of anxiety onto a particular position or individual) with Whitehead’s understanding of evil as unnecessary triviality and discord also is significant. While intractable conflict and discord easily are named as *evil*, in the
Christian tradition, acquiescing or giving up self in order to maintain peace often has been identified as good.\textsuperscript{85} Although there are times when it is appropriate to choose to acquiesce for the good of the greater whole, to do so automatically, without thought, or simply because it is more comfortable, lessens the potential for intense harmony and movement toward beauty.

The conceptualization of the Divine in process thought as luring rather than coercing fits well with the BFST understanding of differentiation of self as defining self and encouraging others to do the same. This parallel offers theological grounding for leadership through differentiation. Growth, differentiation, spirituality, and maturity—all are to be freed up, to use Friedman’s term. They cannot be forced, willed, or poured into an individual, family, or congregation. The response comes from the self of an individual, or from the congregation as a body. Lasting, mature change cannot be forced. It is possible to invite others, and perhaps to challenge others to grow a stronger self, but willing another to change, whether a congregation or an individual, is coercion, considered evil in process thought.

This concrescence of the panentheistic conceptualization of the Divine as luring and the BFST concept of differentiation of self also offers an opportunity to revisit the meaning of familiar terms such as comfort, care and love. As Cobb and Griffin point out,

\textsuperscript{85} David DeBord uses Bowen theory to address this. David DeBord, "A Pastoral Theological Reconstruction of Self-Regard, Self-Sacrifice, and Sanctification in the Wesleyan-Holiness Tradition" (Iliff School of Theology/University of Denver, 1996).
the God described by process theology understands that difference and some degree of discord are integral to the ongoing production of beauty. BFST is clear that increasing differentiation is challenging and not always comfortable. Steinke talks about increasing one’s ability to tolerate the pain of self, as well as the pain of another as part of differentiation. If help, care, and love are concerned with increasing the capacity of an individual, family, or congregation to respond to challenges and to function with minimal symptoms, these actions often may be more challenging than comforting.

The Theological Propositions

The concrescence of Bowen Theory and concepts of process theology I have proposed suggests ways to think about congregations, their challenges, and what is help. It leads to six theological propositions. I introduce and discuss each of these below.

Theological Proposition One

*A norm for the life of a Christian congregation is a positive response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty.*

The purpose of this dissertation is to develop a pastoral theology of pastoral care and leadership of congregations. The need for this pastoral theology grows out of the reality of troubled congregations, i.e., communities of faith that are unable to function as

---

86 Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology.*

87 Steinke, *Healthy Congregations.*
they desire. Problems in these congregations range from severe and intractable conflict, to lethargy and decline. I have defined the church and its congregations as

…human communities that share basic assumptions, among them the belief that God is on the side of life. The church and its congregations are *theotokos*, bearer of God to each other, neighbors, and the world. The church, as the body of Christ, continues the ministry of Christ in the world, at its ideal, embodying the love of God in its particular context.

A religious congregation shares basic assumptions “about God and about life in the world in relation to God.” These assumptions ground both explicit and implicit norms governing the life of the congregation, and guide the congregation’s understanding of what it is about as a faith community. As well, they determine the way in which a congregation functions as *theotokos*. Different assumptions about God lead to different norms, different purposes, and different congregations. The working definition above is broad enough to include a spectrum of assumptions about God and understandings of congregations. My basic assumption that ‘God is on the side of life’ is consistent with the Christian proclamation of creation and resurrection, and thus, I believe, would be acceptable to most Christian congregations. Descriptions of the congregation as *theotokos*, God-bearer, and as the body of Christ also are broad enough to be acceptable in most congregations.

The breadth of this definition allows for traditional theistic conceptualizations of God as transcendent, impassive, and unchanging, conceptualizations that are congruent

---

with a classical philosophical view of God and the world as composed of unchanging substance. The breadth of this definition also allows for a conceptualization of God that is congruent with a view of the world as process and relationship. Thus, to the extent that health is understood as “the ability of a living system to respond to a wide assortment of challenges to its integrity,” this definition allows for a spectrum of understandings of congregational health and ways in which congregations function as theotokos.

In this work, a panentheistic conceptualization of the Divine and the process view of the relationship of the Divine with creation inform what it is that the congregation is about, as well as the way in which the congregation, as theotokos, embodies the love of God. Based on these understandings and the supposition that the teleology of the universe is the maximization of beauty, I advance the first theological proposition to guide the understanding of pastoral care and leadership of congregations: A norm for the life of a Christian congregation is a positive response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty.

The view of reality presented in process metaphysics is one of change and relationship. The two are intertwined and inseparable. Employing the process conceptualization of reality as in flux and relationship in combination with a conceptualization of the Divine as the one who lures creation toward ever-increasing

---

89 Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*; Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church*.

90 Steinke, *Healthy Congregations*, vii-viii.
beauty, I posit change, flux, and relationship as a norm for congregational life. Here I draw on Whitehead’s description of the adventurous quality of life:

> A race preserves its vigour so long as it harbours a real contrast between what has been and what may be; and so long as it is nerved by the vigour to adventure beyond the safeties of the past. Without adventure civilization is in full decay.\(^9^1\)

It is important to clarify that Whitehead does not advocate change not simply for the sake of change. Rather, he advocates change because change is integral to the ongoing production of beauty and is necessary for adaptation and response to an ever-changing environment. A congregation for which change and adventure are the norm rather than the exception has the capacity to respond to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and to respond challenges.

The working definition I have posed for congregations uses two images: *theotokos*, or God-bearer, and the body of Christ. Having clarified a panentheistic conceptualization of God, it now is possible to be more specific about the God the congregation bears to one another, neighbor, and the world, as well as the way in which the congregation as the body of Christ embodies God’s love.

The God borne by the congregation has three characteristics. First, God is with us and in us—with and in all of creation, and all of creation is in God. This relationship cannot be broken because God does not disappear. Humans can distance themselves from God in various ways, but those actions do not change the reality that God is with us.

—all of us. Second, God is on the side of life in the fullest sense, and God lures and challenges humans to participate in this ongoing, evolutionary, adventurous project of creation. Third, God is hope and grace. In each moment, God offers new possibilities for transformation and movement toward beauty that are on the side of life in the broadest, most inclusive sense of the word.

The lure of the Divine toward beauty, the very way in which God relates to creation, is a model for the way in which the congregation, as the body of Christ, seeks to embody the love of God. The eternally consistent primordial nature of God, the place of all novel possibilities consistent with God’s intention for creation, suggests an ideal for a congregation’s clarity of purpose and direction. The consequent nature of God, always related to the world and constantly offering God’s initial aim, “the impulse to actualize the best possibility open to it, given the concrete situation,” suggests an ideal for the way in which the congregation relates internally and externally. Without force or coercion God lures, and perhaps, as Friedman suggests, challenges creation toward beauty. A congregation holding this conceptualization of the Divine is more likely to model a similar understanding of God in its being.

92 Cobb and Griffin, Process Theology, 53.

In responding to the lure of the Divine toward beauty, the way the congregation thinks about God shapes the way it lives in the world. The congregation seeks to embody these characteristics of the Divine.

The first characteristic the congregation seeks to embody is the panentheistic conceptualization of the Divine: God with us, in us, and in all of creation, as creation is in God. A congregation that embodies this understanding of the Divine is inclusive of all people. It welcomes, respects and cares for all people and all creation. It does not, however, require homogeneity. It is a differentiated community in which contrasts contribute to its richness and offer the potential of creativity and novelty.

The second characteristic to be embodied by the congregation is the understanding that God is on side of life in fullest sense. This involves promoting life both by addressing those things that diminish life, and supporting those things that encourage life. It involves thoughtful consideration of some unexamined actions in the life of a congregation, including understandings of comfort, care, and love discussed earlier in this chapter. A congregation on the side of life seeks to understand what promotes life in the fullest and broadest sense.

The third characteristic embodied by the congregation is an understanding of the Divine who seeks in each occasion to actualize the best possibility as a God of grace and hope. God offers new possibilities for transformation and movement toward beauty, possibilities that are on the side of life. A congregation that embodies grace and hope is
able to stay in relationship through difficult times, i.e., it embodies differentiation. It is able to stand with those who suffer, lending a hand to help. It has greater capacity for adventure. Shaped by its understanding that God offers new possibilities and transformation in every moment, it is able to risk the possibility of mistakes. Trusting in God’s ongoing presence and lure, it looks to the future with hope. This congregation is graceful in its embodiment of the new possibilities that God offers. Again, this does not mean the congregation loses its ‘self,’ i.e., it’s understanding of who it is and what it is about. Just as the primordial nature of the Divine is consistent, so also is the understanding of the congregation in terms of what it is about as theotokos and the body of Christ consistent.

Finally, a congregation that responds to the lure of the Divine and is open to every-increasing diversity held together in intense harmony is likely, at times, to find it has produced something entirely unexpected and unplanned. Clayton’s concept of emergence describes this quality:

\[\text{\ldots the view that new and unpredictable natural phenomena are naturally produced by interactions in nature; that these new structures, organisms, and ideas are not reducible to the subSystems on which they depend, and that the newly evolved realities in turn exercise a causal influence on the parts out of which they arose.}^{94}\]

I now offer another description of emergence: a serendipitous surprise born of a spirit of adventure and a response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty. The greater complexity a congregation is able to hold together, the more potential there is for something new to

---

94 Clayton, Mind and Emergence: From Quantum to Consciousness, vi.
emerge. This serendipitous surprise cannot be planned nor proven. It is, however, illustrated in the presentation of Third Church in Chapter 7.

A norm for the life of a Christian congregation is a positive response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and emergence. This norm shapes the way in which the congregation lives. In light of the discussion above, I now offer greater clarity of the understanding of *theotokos*. A congregation, as *theotokos*, embodies the presence of God’s differentiating, life-seeking, graceful and creative relationship with the universe.

Theological Proposition Two

*The change inherent in movement toward beauty provokes anxiety and reactivity that inhibit, prevent, or even reverse a congregational body’s movement toward beauty.*

A congregation that responds to the lure toward beauty is challenged to synthesize differences, whether differences between individuals and families in the congregation, differences in the context of the congregation, or differences in direction and vision. Thus, any movement of a congregation toward beauty requires the conjunction of disjunctions and ultimately requires change.

Congregations are highly complex societies of occasions. They are composed of families, which are composed of individuals, which are composed of organs, which are

---

95 The term “serendipitous creativity” as a concept of God was introduced to process thought by scholar Gordon Kaufman in Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). My use of the term is independent of his scholarship, and refers to newly emerging phenomenon.
composed of… (and so on, and so on…). Process thought considers highly complex societies of occasions to have greater intensity and greater potential for value and enjoyment than simpler aggregates. However, highly complex societies also carry greater potential for disharmony, for discord, for lapse into triviality, and for evil. Although the image of the congregation offered in the discussion of the first theological proposition is beautiful, in reality, it is not a common occurrence.

Whitehead uses the terms discord and triviality to describe occasions in which incompatible elements cannot be brought together. Although there is not a direct correlation, I believe that Bowen’s concepts of chronic anxiety, reactivity, and emotional process are helpful in accounting for these situations. Thus, Theological Proposition Two states: 

*The change and challenge inherent in movement toward beauty provoke anxiety and reactivity that can inhibit, prevent, or even reverse a congregational body’s movement toward beauty.* Although this proposition is offered in relationship to a congregation in which the norm is a positive response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty, it applies to any congregation in a situation of change and challenge.

Return for a moment to the study congregations presented in Chapter 2. The situation of First Church illustrates the potential for discord to inhibit and/or prevent movement toward beauty. The congregation experienced multiple changes over a short period of time. Within two years of the arrival of a new senior pastor, the majority of the

---

staff had resigned. These changes, in conjunction with other stressors, contributed to heightened anxiety in the congregation. Over the years, conflict had been the primary response to anxiety. In this situation, the conflict grew in intensity to the point that a number of members left. Anxiety and anxious reactivity in the congregation severely inhibited its efforts to be *theotokos* to each other, much less to their neighbors and the world. Anxiety and anxious reactivity thwarted efforts toward differentiation and prevented movement of the congregation toward beauty.

The situation at Second Church illustrates the potential of triviality to inhibit and/or prevent movement toward beauty. Although conflict had been the congregation’s response to anxiety in the past, in this situation the *fear* of discord and conflict inhibited the possibility of intensity of differences, which is one requirement of beauty. Because its members were unable even to acknowledge the existence of differences, Second Church suffered from what Whitehead calls triviality. Although the difficulties at Second Church were less dramatic than at First Church, anxious reactivity and emotional processes related to change and challenge significantly impacted the capacity of both congregations to respond to the lure of the Divine and to be *theotokos*, i.e., to be the presence of God’s differentiating, life-seeking, graceful and creative relationship with the universe.

A review of Bowen’s understanding of the biologically rooted force for individuality or differentiation and the biologically rooted force for togetherness is
relevant to this discussion. In any congregation (or family), the greater the strength of the togetherness force, the higher the level of chronic anxiety (fear of what may be), the less flexibility there is to deal with change, and the greater the potential is for change to disrupt the homoeostasis. Thus, a congregation with a strong togetherness force is less able to tolerate change and difference or even the threat of change and difference, while a congregation in which the togetherness force is not as strong has greater capacity to respond and adapt. The impact of a stressful event on a congregation with a stronger togetherness force and higher level of chronic anxiety is greater than the impact of the same event on a congregation in which the individuality force is stronger.

Whatever the comfortable balance, when it is upset there are automatic, unconscious attempts to manage increases in anxiety and to regain a comfortable homeostasis. These coping mechanisms were described previously as congregational emotional process, and included drifting away, conflict, adaptation and overfunctioning to preserve harmony, and projection of anxiety onto a particular position or individual. These responses inhibit the congregation’s ability to function.

Connections easily are drawn between Bowen’s descriptions of emotional processes used to manage anxiety and Whitehead’s understanding of evil. As discussed previously, in Whitehead’s system, evil is understood in two ways: as triviality, and as discord. The evil of triviality describes occasions in which diversity is diminished and

---

97 Adapted from Kerr and Bowen, *Family Evaluation*, 255.
the past is repeated. The evil of discord describes occasions in which extreme diversity leads to mutual destruction of elements.⁹⁸

With triviality, the lack of intensity or difference between the prehensions may allow harmony, but there is little value. Observation of human experience in relationship systems suggests many situations in which the lack of difference is related to an individual unconsciously and automatically relinquishing a thought, feeling, or behavior that will increase intensity. Bowen describes this as “giving up self.”⁹⁹ Whitehead describes it as anesthesia, an effort to avoid increased anxiety and discomfort simply by excluding the disjunctive element.¹⁰⁰ Although anesthesia allows an individual or group to manage anxiety, it also inhibits the capacity to adapt to change, much less to respond positively to the lure of the Divine toward beauty. In process thought, unnecessary triviality is considered a form of evil.

The process concept of discord describes situations in which the diversity is so intense that destruction threatens harmonization. With intense conflict, individuals or groups that hold incompatible, diverse opinions use a variety of means to impose their opinion on the other, to will one another to change, or to convert one another. As Whitehead writes, “while harmony is bound up with the preservation of the individual

---

⁹⁸ Whitehead, Adventures of Ideas, 354.
⁹⁹ Bowen, Family Therapy in Clinical Practice, 111.
¹⁰⁰ Whitehead, Adventures of Ideas, 334.
significance of detail, …discord consists in its destruction.”  

Again, discord prevents the maximization of beauty and also is considered a form of evil.

It is important to clarify that diversity does not necessarily and inevitably lead to discord. As Friedman explains, “the differences people ‘differ’ over do not cause the differing.”

He writes, “…what creates polarization is not the actual content of the issue on which a family ‘splits.’ It is rather the emotional processes that foster conflict of wills.” Emotional process drives the differing that leads to congregational splits, not the differences themselves.

According to BFST, anxiety and reactivity are the primary variables driving the intensity of responses to diversity. As they escalate, the prefrontal neocortex (the intellectual system) is overpowered by the automatic responses of the lower brain, (the emotional system). As the congregation goes into survival mode its capacity to consider ways to manage being different-together decreases. Simultaneously, differences become more intense. Anxiety spreads through interlocking triangles, symptoms begin to develop in multiple places, and, to use Whitehead’s description, it appears that evil has taken an upper hand.

The conjunction of BFST with Whitehead’s understanding of evil offers several insights. First, it provides an explanation of how the intensity of differences can move to

101 Ibid., 339.
102 Friedman, Generation to Generation, 204.
103 Ibid., 232.
discord and to destruction. Escalating levels of anxiety and reactivity easily are able
drive differences toward differing, discord, and destruction. Second, it offers the
possibility of a response to discord that has the potential to contribute to a more
satisfactory synthesis and therefore to movement toward beauty.

Whether the response to the challenges of difference and change is to adapt and
give up self in order to avoid intensity and anxiety, or to attempt to convert others to one’s
own position, these responses to anxiety are reactive, and inhibit the capacity of a
congregational body to respond to the lure of the Divine toward beauty, to be theotokos,
the presence of God’s differentiating, life-seeking, graceful and creative relationship with
the universe. Friedman describes differentiation of self as a broad-spectrum antibiotic for
all anxiety related difficulties. (Recall that in BFST, all symptoms are understood to be
related to anxiety in some way.)

Differentiation is a healing phenomenon.

In this discussion of Theological Proposition Two, I have considered how anxiety
and reactivity can inhibit, prevent, or even reverse a congregational body’s movement
toward beauty. Theological Proposition Three suggests ways in which differentiation, a
process built into creation, is both healing and creative.

---

104 ______, "Bowen Theory and Therapy."
Theological Proposition Three

*Differentiation is a process built into creation by which the Divine lures creation toward beauty. Differentiation promotes healing and nurtures the emergence of new phenomena.*

Bowen borrows the term differentiation from cell biology where it describes the process by which a less specialized cell becomes more specialized, i.e., it differentiates and performs separate yet related functions in the organism.105 In humans, differentiation describes the capacity to balance the biological forces of individuality and togetherness, to choose between more intellectually or emotionally determined functioning, and to be a self-in-relationship. In that the correlation of higher levels of differentiation with lower levels of chronic anxiety results in greater capacity to respond to challenges, greater capacity for life and better functioning, differentiation is related to healing. In that increasing complexity of evolving life requires the capacity to be different-together, differentiation is related to emergence.

According to Whitehead, “the teleology of the universe is directed to the production of beauty.”106 As discussed previously, beauty is the “harmony of contrast,” the “ordering of novelty,” and a “combination of unity and multiplicity.”107 In my own

words, beauty is the greatest diversity that can be held together without falling into chaos and violence, or into homogeneity. The overall direction of evolution toward increasing complexity is reflective of the purpose of God. Thus, the conjunction of Whitehead’s concept of beauty and Bowen’s concept of differentiation comprise Theological Proposition Three: *Differentiation is a process built into creation by which the Divine lures creation toward beauty. Differentiation promotes healing and nurtures the emergence of new phenomena.*

The connection of differentiation to movement toward beauty is almost intuitive. Different-together is the basis of beauty. Different-together is the basis of complex life, from the earliest multicellular organisms—aggregates of eukaryotic cells—to bodies, to families, to societies. Together or relationship is a given that cannot be escaped. Different within the togetherness is the basis of complexity, of increased adaptivity, and of beauty. Differentiation is built into creation, and is that process necessary to ongoing response of creation to the lure of the Divine toward beauty. The time frame for this is immense.

The basis for the relationship of differentiation, healing and movement toward beauty was developed in Theological Proposition Two. Evil—unnecessary discord or triviality—is that which prevents maximization of beauty. It is a negative response to the challenge of holding differences-together in a process of concrescence. The intractable conflict experienced by First Church is an example of destructive discord. The lethargy experience by Second Church is an example of triviality. As anxiety increased, the
intensity of reactive responses to differences increased, and the capacity of the
congregations to be *theotokos* decreased.

It is possible to illustrate the healing character of differentiation using
Whitehead’s understanding of process. Although each actuality (occasion of experience)
begin by receiving multiple influences from its past, it is not determined completely by
its past. The initial aim of the Divine and the actuality’s own subjective aim influence its
final shape. The Divine initial aim is any actuality’s impulse “to actualize the best
possibility open to it, given its concrete situation.”\footnote{Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, 53.} Although the actuality has the
freedom to choose to actualize other possibilities, according to Whitehead, God *lures*
each occasion toward fulfilling the Divine aim, which ultimately, is toward the ongoing
production of beauty. The actuality’s subjective aim is its own novel appropriation of
past events, including its decision to complete the Divine initial aim or to take a different
path.

From this perspective it can be said that in each moment God offers some
potential to lessen anxious reactivity and increase differentiation, even if by a small
amount. As reactivity decreases, so does the need to diminish or abolish differences by
either giving up self (triviality) or using any possible means to convert the other (discord
and destruction). As each actuality responds to the past in ways that increase
differentiation, it responds to the Divine aim that lures toward beauty and healing.
Increasing differentiation involves increasing the capacity to be different-together, the capacity for self-in-relationship. It involves increased thoughtfulness (intellectual system) and decreased automatic reactivity (emotional system), which allow overall reactivity and anxiety to subside. It involves self-regulation, which diminishes inhibition of others by creating space and encouragement for the other to be. It involves self-definition in contrast to giving up self.

As discussed earlier, healing is not a state to be attained. Rather, it is an ongoing process of inhibiting those things that inhibit a positive response to the lure toward beauty, and strengthening those aspects that promote such movement. Healing involves strengthening the organism’s capacity for life. Differentiation, according to Friedman, is a healing phenomenon in that it inhibits the inhibitors and promotes the strengths of the organism. For troubled congregations, healing involves inhibiting the reactivity that prevents a positive response to the lure of the Divine, and promoting the congregation’s capacity to be different-together, to define self, to function as theotokos and embody the love of God.

Differentiation is a healing process. Differentiation also promotes creativity and emergence. As the capacity to be different-together increases, so does the capacity for the synthesis of prehensions with greater contrast. Greater contrast produces greater intensity, enjoyment, novelty, and value. With enough contrast among the prehensions,
the new synthesis itself introduces new contrasts. This is Whitehead’s description of
the production of beauty. In Chapter 5, the idea of beauty was extended through the
discussion of emergence. In Theological Proposition One, I posited that a congregation
that responds to the lure of the Divine and is open to ever-increasing diversity held
together in harmony is likely, at times, to find something unexpected and unplanned has
emerged, i.e., a serendipitous surprise. Differentiation is a process integral to healing, to
the development of complex life, and to the emergence of surprising new phenomenon.

Differentiation not only is a process by which the Divine lures creation toward
beauty, it is a healing and creative process. Thus, from this point forward, any
description of differentiation as a process by which the Divine lures creation toward
beauty assumes healing to be related to movement toward beauty and emergence.

Theological Proposition Four

The human capacity to increase differentiation promotes the capacity to
respond positively to the lure of the Divine toward beauty.

To this point I have offered the following theological propositions: (1) a norm for
the life of a Christian congregation is a positive response to the lure of the Divine toward
beauty and toward emergence; (2) change and challenge inherent in movement toward
beauty provoke anxiety and reactivity that can inhibit, prevent, or even reverse a
congregational body’s movement toward beauty and emergence; and (3) differentiation is

109 Whitehead, Adventures of Ideas, 341.
a process built into creation by which the Divine lures creation toward beauty.

Differentiation promotes healing and nurtures the emergence of new phenomena.

Proposition Four builds on them: The human capacity to increase differentiation promotes the capacity to respond positively to the lure of the Divine.

BFST locates the capacity for differentiation in the intellectual system, believed to be unique to humans. Differentiation requires the ability to observe the emotional system, i.e., the automatic, instinctual behaviors and processes common to all life, as it plays out in the natural world, to recognize the part one plays in it, and to have some amount of choice (intellectual system) as to how much of one’s own behavior, feeling, and thinking will be influenced by it. The greater the capacity to recognize and limit automatic emotional processes used to manage anxiety (including giving up self to maintain peace and imposing one’s will on others), the greater capacity there is to maintain differences-together, i.e., the unity of multiplicity that process thought sees as integral in movement toward beauty.

Bowen posits that humans have a set basic level of differentiation of self by the time they leave home as young adults. However, the functional level of differentiation can continue to improve through increased awareness of the influence of anxiety and reactivity on one’s functioning, and efforts to define a self. Over a long period of time it is possible to increase the basic level of differentiation to a degree. As Bowen writes,
Systems therapy cannot remake that which nature created, but through learning how the organism operates, controlling anxiety, and learning to better adapt to the fortunes and misfortunes of life, it can give nature a better chance.\textsuperscript{110}

Bowen therapy involves lowering levels of anxiety and promoting differentiation. Even a small increase in differentiation can have a significant impact on one’s capacity to deal with challenge and change.

The parallel in process thought would be a positive response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty, which involves several aspects. First is a general agreement with the theological assumption itself, i.e., that increasing complexity, the \textit{harmony of contrast} and the \textit{ordering of novelty} are descriptive of what God is about in the universe. Second is an understanding of what inhibits movement toward beauty (anxiety and reactivity), and what promotes movement toward beauty (differentiation). The third aspect of a positive response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty entails active participation, i.e., embodying that which promotes movement toward beauty: differentiation of self.\textsuperscript{111}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{110} Bowen, \textit{Family Therapy in Clinical Practice}, 410. \\
\textsuperscript{111} It is necessary to clarify a difference between Whitehead and BFST in terms of their understandings of self-determination and differentiation of self. Both process metaphysics and BFST recognize that humans are, to a significant degree, determined by the received past. Both also recognize some degree of choice available in terms of the \textit{response} to the past. There is a subtle, yet significant difference between the idea of self-determination in process thought and differentiation of self in BFST. Self-determination has to do with some amount of freedom to respond positively or negatively to the initial aim of the Divine. It can inhibit or promote movement toward beauty. Differentiation, however, is that which promotes movement toward beauty—it does not inhibit it. There is some freedom of choice in whether or not to respond in a more differentiated manner to a challenge, but in light of Bowen’s understanding of the role of anxiety in all symptoms (emotional, physical, and behavioral), the absence of a more differentiated response is related to the automatic, instinctual responses governed by the emotional system. The point made here is that differentiation of self is not to be equated to self-determination. Moves toward differentiation are moves toward beauty that promote life.
\end{flushright}
The capacity to increase differentiation promotes the capacity for a less-anxious presence, for self-regulation, self-definition, and staying connected. With this ability to increase differentiation—even a little bit—humans have the capacity to promote healing, and to increase their ability to respond to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and emergence.

Theological Proposition Five

Central to care and leadership of congregations are the presence and being of a clergy leader who is working on differentiation of self and responding to the lure of the Divine toward beauty. This clergy leader promotes healing and nurtures emergence in and of the congregational body.

Building on the first four propositions, I now turn to the question of care and leadership of troubled congregations. I have discussed differentiation as a healing phenomenon, as a process by which the Divine lures creation toward beauty, and as a response to the lure of the divine. Care, healing, and leadership of congregations, thus, involve promoting differentiation in and of the congregation. This assertion is consistent with the ultimate aim of all Bowen-based therapy, which is to promote differentiation in and of a family.

In Bowen-based therapy, the differentiation of the therapist promotes the differentiation of a family. With Bowen-based pastoral leadership, the differentiation of the pastoral leader, i.e., the presence and being of a leader working on his or her own differentiation of self promotes the differentiation, i.e., the health and maturation of the
congregation. Therefore, in Theological Proposition Five I posit: *Central to care and leadership of congregations are the presence and being of a clergy leader who is working on differentiation of self and responding to the lure of the Divine toward beauty. This clergy leader promotes healing and nurtures emergence in and of the congregational body.*

As leader and shepherd of a faith community, the clergy leader is in a unique position of focus, trust, and responsibility in relationship to the congregation. Each week he or she stands before the community as *theotokos*, representing God to the people and the people to God. The authority of the role can be significant, whether it is grounded in the charisma of the office, the charisma of the individual, or personal knowledge and skills. The leader of an emotional system has the greatest capacity to influence the functioning of that system. Given the emotional significance of religion in the lives of many people, and the charge to the pastor of speaking words consistent with the particular faith tradition’s understanding of God, the functional position of the clergy leader in the congregational system and in the congregation’s constituent family systems has significant potential to promote and/or inhibit differentiation and a positive response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty.

It is through one’s own work on differentiation of self and response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty that a clergyperson nurtures the healing and emergence in and of a congregation. The focus is on one’s own functioning, not on fixing or healing the
faith community. Four aspects of differentiation and, in particular, leadership through differentiation, are relevant to this discussion: a less-anxious presence, self-regulation, self-definition, and staying connected. These aspects are all interconnected.

Through the less-anxious presence of a pastoral leader who is working on his or her own differentiation, the congregational system begins to be calmer, i.e., less automatically reactive and twitchy. This new level of calm enables people in the congregation to be a little more thoughtful and a little less reactive themselves.

The self-regulation of a pastoral leader working on differentiation inhibits automatic responses to manage anxiety, including giving up self in order to maintain peace and homeostasis, and efforts to convert others to one’s own position. When the leader recognizes that alleviation of anxiety and pain offer only a quick fix, and inhibit opportunities for learning, self-responsibility, and growth, he or she works to be present in ways that promote healthier functioning of others.

The self-definition of a pastoral leader working on differentiation offers clarity of vision and thinking that is based on one’s own principles and beliefs. It allows one to maintain a position within an anxious system in which the togetherness force produces group think rather than creative difference-together. The self-definition of a pastoral leader creates space for others to define themselves.

A pastoral leader who intentionally maintains connections and relationships, especially with individuals who increase one’s anxiety levels, shifts the automatic
distancing responses of the system. By staying connected in a less-anxious, self-
regulated, and self-defined manner, there is less potential for interlocking triangles to
spread anxiety, and greater potential for less reactive and more responses by congregation
members. Staying connected in the midst of anxiety has the potential to free up the
differentiation of others as well.

In Theological Proposition Three, I drew connections between differentiation of
self and a positive response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty, identifying
differentiation as the means by which life is able to continue it increasingly complex,
adventurous evolution. As a congregation increases differentiation, its capacity to be
different-together increases. The potential for greater intensity and harmony increases, as
does the possibility for the emergence of something new. Although a clergy leader works
toward this, it is not a goal that can be reached and achieved. Rather, it is a vision and
process that lines the congregation up “with what has worked throughout the ages to
advance the evolution of our species and the image of our Creator.”112 Working toward
the creativity and the emergence of novelty is part being theotokos and embodying the
lure and love of the Divine.

112 Friedman, Generation to Generation, 233.
Theological Proposition Six

*By their presence and being, a congregational body working on differentiation responds to the creator’s lure toward beauty and nurtures emergence in and of its families and neighbors.*

The presence and being of a clergy leader working on differentiation of self are central to care and leadership of a congregational body, i.e., to promoting healing as well as the congregation’s capacity to respond to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and emergence. In a similar way, through their presence and being, a congregation that is working on differentiation and responding to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and emergence cares for and leads its families and others with whom it is in relationship. Functioning as a less-anxious, well-defined presence in its larger context, the self-regulation of the congregation and its members can be helpful in reducing anxiety and reactivity in its community. Intentionally seeking to be *theotokos*, the presence of God’s differentiating, life-seeking, graceful and creative relationship with the universe, the congregation promotes multiplicity in unity and movement toward beauty that values each individual as well as the whole.

Friedman describes families as the basic molecules of society. They both affect and are affected by the larger context. Anxiety (fear of what is as well as fear of what may be), flows from the family into the institutions of society and back. Congregations, as institutions of society whose members are families, receive anxiety from their families
and from the larger context. The way in which the congregation responds to anxiety has
the potential to magnify or decrease community anxiety. A congregation responding to
the lure of the Divine toward beauty is less threatened by change and diversity, therefore
is less anxious, and thus, by its very presence and being, offers a more thoughtful,
constructive response to the challenges and anxiety of life. Thus, they can serve to
promote movement toward beauty

The first of these six theological propositions constructed to guide pastoral care
and leadership of congregations offered a norm for congregational life: a positive
response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and emergence. In discussion of this
norm, I clarified my understanding of the congregation as theotokos, i.e., the presence of
God’s differentiating, life-seeking, graceful and creative relationship with the universe.
The second theological proposition considered the connections of anxious reactivity and
evil as that which inhibits a positive response of a congregation to the lure of the Divine
toward beauty. Theological Proposition Three then identified differentiation as a healing
phenomenon and a process by which the Divine promotes healing and lures creation
toward beauty and emergence. In Theological Proposition Four, the human capacity to
increase differentiation was recognized. The final two theological propositions discussed
the healing and creative capacities of a leader’s or congregation’s work on differentiation
in relationship to larger relationship systems. Drawing on these newly constructed
propositions, I now return to consider congregations and the central task of a constructive articulation of pastoral care and pastoral leadership as nurturing emergence.

**Emerging Definitions**

A Healthy, Emerging Congregation

Based on a functional understanding of health as the capacity for life and the ability of an organism or living system to respond to challenges and change, I offer the following descriptions of a *healthy* congregation, and of a healthy *emerging* congregation.

A *healthy* congregation bears God to each other, to neighbor, and to the world. It embodies the love of God in its context. Thus, a healthy congregation functions as it desires, based on its assumptions about God and life in the world in relationship to God. Although assumptions about God vary between congregations and faith traditions, a healthy congregation, as a body, has clarity of what it is about, and integrates its beliefs with its way of being in the world.

A healthy, *emerging* congregation in this work, grounded in the theological assumption that God is about maximizing beauty and ongoing creation, is this: a healthy, *emerging* congregation responds to the lure of the Divine toward beauty, and is open to emergence—serendipitous surprise. The ways in which it is *theotokos*, and embodies the love of God are shaped by these assumptions: (1) God is in all and all is in God, (2) God
is on the side of life, in the fullest sense, and (3) the Divine who seeks to actualize the best possibility in each occasion is a God of hope and grace. Thus, I visualize a healthy, emerging congregation as a community of faith that:

- Continually seeks to grasp, articulate and embody an understanding of the Divine as ongoing creativity promoting life in the fullest sense;
- Views working with differences and changes as challenges and opportunities to respond positively to the lure of the Divine toward beauty; and
- Frees up spirituality, and nurtures differentiation of self and maturity as a way of being that allows individuals and the congregational body to be theotokos to each other, neighbor, and world, i.e., to be the presence of God’s differentiating, life-seeking, graceful, creative relationship with the universe.

This description leads back to the assumption with which I began: that God is on the side of life, in the largest sense of the word. Thus, to be theotokos, and to embody the love of God involve being on the side of life, in the largest sense of the word.

Pastoral Care and Leadership: Nurturing Emergence

The question then is, how does a pastoral caregiver promote healing of a congregational body, and how does a pastoral leader nurture emergence? He or she promotes healing and nurtures emergence through his or her emotional being and presence in the congregation. This assertion follows from understandings developed to

293
this point. First, complexity, diversity, and change are reflective of the ongoing creative process of the Divine, into which humanity is lured, and the church is called. Second, the emotional processes and anxiety present in congregations have the potential to inhibit or destroy movement toward beauty, thereby diminishing the capacity of the congregation to respond to challenges and change. And third, differentiation promotes healing and movement toward beauty and emergence.

The health-promoting being and presence of a clergy leader are related to differentiation of self. The emotional being and presence of a leader working on differentiation of self free up natural processes of healing and nurture the capacity of the congregation to respond to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and emergence. The leader’s being and presence nurture the possibility of a serendipitous surprise.

Multiple aspects of differentiation and leadership through differentiation are involved in nurturing: self-definition, self-regulation, connection, and the less anxious presence.

*Self-definition*

Self-definition involves both the content of one’s beliefs and thinking, and process or action one takes in living them. Drawing on the BFST ideas of pseudo-self and solid-self, I believe that an individual who has a way of thinking that in and of itself is consistent, and is, to a large extent in concert with factual knowledge, is better able to
maintain a self in the midst of an anxious system. Although the leader may or may not articulate the content of the thinking, having clarity of beliefs and thinking is central to self-definition. When the leader does articulate the content of the beliefs or thinking, it is never with the goal of convincing or converting another to one’s thinking. It simply is an articulation of thoughts and beliefs.

In anxious systems, the greater strength of the togetherness force applies pressure toward thinking alike. The process of calm, clear self-definition by a leader in an anxious system lessens the intensity of anxiety and thus lessens strength of the togetherness force. When a leader is able to define self, to say, “this is who I am and this is what I believe,” others in the system gain courage as well as space to do so. Thus, the leader’s actions and words nurture a stronger “self” in the members and the congregation as a whole.

*Self-regulation*

Self-regulation, a major piece of differentiation, requires managing one’s self in the midst of rampant anxiety, without resort to distancing, use of conflict, or adapting and overfunctioning. This ongoing learning process requires careful observation of self-in-system, as well as careful family of origin work to begin to identify situations and processes that intensify one’s reactivity. It requires thinking through these situations and making ongoing efforts to be a little calmer and less reactive the next time a situation arises. Work to maintain a calmer, more thoughtful self in one’s family of origin
probably offers the greatest return. In terms of nurture, it is almost self-evident that a less reactive and calmer being serves to calm the congregation as a whole, to lessen some of the inhibitors of movement toward beauty, such as giving up self (triviality) and pressuring others to convert (discord). Thus it opens possibilities for increased differentiation on the part of others, which contributes to the differentiation and health of the congregation as a whole.

Connection

BFST and process philosophy both affirm the reality that we are connected. It is quite easy to define one’s self when in isolation. Likewise, there is less need for self-regulation when one is alone. Differentiation, however, is always within relationship. The functioning of any individual in a system affects the functioning of any other individual. The functioning of the ‘head’ or leader of a system, because of his or her position within the system, has greater potential to affect the whole.

Presence has to do with one’s connections to members of the congregation. As Friedman points out, a direct connection with each individual in the congregation is not necessary for the functioning of the leader to have an affect. Just as the brain influences all parts of the body simultaneously, so the functioning of the head influences all parts. It is not necessarily a cognitive or verbal influence. The presence—self-defined, self-regulated, less anxious, and connected—influences the congregation as a whole. Thus,
when a clergy leader distances and withdraws in response to anxiety, the very lack of presence is present, and anxiety of the larger system increases. Or, when a clergy leader reacts to the reactivity of another person, his or her reactivity is magnified throughout the system. And, when a clergy leader maintains a fairly calm presence in the midst of a crisis or difficult situation, it helps the larger system become calmer, more thoughtful, and less reactive. When a clergy leader holds a conceptualization of the Divine as the one who offers as an initial aim the best possibility for that moment as a lure toward beauty, his or her calmer presence also is a graceful and hopeful presence.

Emergence, a serendipitous surprise, cannot be planned, anticipated, or forced. On the other hand, it easily can be inhibited by anxiety and reactivity. To nurture emergence is to free up that which is part of nature—the process of differentiation that is built into creation—the very process by which we respond to and participate to God’s own ongoing project. A clergy leader can inhibit the inhibitors and promote the strengths in efforts to free up healing, differentiation, spirituality, movement toward beauty, and serendipitous surprise. This does not require technique, expertise, or great knowledge. Rather, it requires curiosity, a spirit of adventure, a trustful hope, and graceful willingness to continue to respond to the lure of the Divine toward beauty.
Pastoral Care and Leadership of Congregations

Pastoral care and leadership are the focus of this dissertation. As is evident at this point, however, in this presentation differences between pastoral care and leadership are minimal. Both are concerned with promoting differentiation and nurturing emergence. The central tool of both is the presence and being of a clergy leader working on differentiation of self. Although care and leadership often are conceived of as two different activities with different populations and different goals, I contend that they are qualitatively identical and share the same purpose: freeing up the capacity to respond to the lure of the Divine. Freeing up involves promoting differentiation through one’s own work on differentiation.

In deeply troubled congregations, the initial emphasis is on inhibiting the inhibitors of movement toward beauty may be understood more as pastoral care of the congregation. For example, at First Church, destructive efforts to convert others must be inhibited. Similarly, at Second Church, automatic responses of giving up self must be inhibited. A clergy leader promotes healing and nurtures emergence by both inhibiting the inhibitors and by promoting the strengths of the congregation and its members. A pastor caring for a congregation cannot heal a congregation. He or she only can function in a way that allows the anxiety of the congregation to decrease, and that frees up the healing processes built into nature. This functioning includes one’s own self-definition,
self-regulation, and work on relationships, as well as promoting these aspects in the congregation.

In congregations that are less troubled the emphasis is more on strengthening the resources upon which the congregation draws to be *theotokos* to each other, neighbor, and the world, and the imaginative capacity to discern God’s lure. Although these congregations are less anxious, challenge and change will increase anxiety and reactivity. At these times, a less-anxious presence is important. At all times, however, the self-definition, self-regulation, and ability to maintain relationships, and to promote these capacities in others are central to leadership.

From the perspective developed in this work, pastoral care and leadership of congregations are not a set of techniques, or tasks, or goals. They are better described as a way of thinking that shapes a way of being that promotes the ability of the congregation to function as *theotokos* and the body of Christ.

Although I have not seen it in written text, many times I have heard people who studied and worked with Bowen quote a favorite quip of his: “You can’t make a bean grow any faster by pulling on it.” Given basic nutrients and some inhibition of inhibitors, the bean is going to do what it does—grow and produce. A congregation, given basic nutrients and some inhibition of the inhibitors, is going to do what it does—grow, bear God to each other, neighbor, and the world, and embody the love of God in its context.
The creative emergence of differentiation, beauty, and serendipitous surprise appear to be on the side of life. Nurturing the emergence of these realities is what the Divine is about.
Pastoral theology brings together theological and cognate resources to construct theological principles to guide care. I have presented six theological propositions that undergird the pastoral theology proposed in this dissertation. In this concluding chapter, I turn to concrete situations of care, in light of these propositions as well as the understandings of a healthy, emerging congregation, and pastoral care and leadership.

For Clergy Leaders

The use of BFST in this project presents a unique challenge in terms of the actual guidance of care and leadership. Because Bowen stresses a way of thinking rather than a technique or way of doing care, a set of instructions or specific goals is not congruent with this perspective. Insofar as I have developed an understanding of the presence and being of the clergy leader as help, in this section I present questions and tasks directed primarily toward the thinking that shapes the presence and being of the clergy leader in the congregation.
The tasks and questions below are rooted in the assumption that individuals using them meet the following criteria: (1) have a basic understanding of emotional systems and their functioning as presented in BFST; (2) have a good understanding of how the congregation with which they are working has functioned through its history and currently is functioning; and (3) have been and currently are doing intentional family of origin work.

As with all other aspects of this dissertation, this presentation is more circular than linear. All of the tasks and questions are inter-related around three foci. The first is on self-definition, and offers questions designed to assist the clergyperson to articulate a clear understanding of God and the church. Here it is important to recall that one’s thinking and ability to gain clarity about one’s beliefs are central to the process of differentiation. The second focus is on ‘self in system.’ The third explores the clergy leader’s thinking and experiences of responding positively to the lure of the Divine toward beauty.

What Do I Think? What Do I Believe?

BFST describes differences between the pseudo-self and solid self. The solid self, as discussed earlier, consists of firmly held beliefs and convictions that have been formed over a period of time, and change from within self, not in response to anxiety related to
the togetherness force. To assess the presence of a solid self, Friedman suggests the questions “What would I die for? and What isn’t worth it?” 113

To develop solid self, clergy leaders need clarity about their own beliefs. To be theotokos, that is, to bear God to the congregation, it is important to be able to articulate one’s own understanding of the Divine and the church. Although I have constructed an understanding of the Divine and congregations in this work, an individual working on differentiation would not simply accept my understanding. It is important to think through one’s own beliefs. The following questions can lead to an articulation of one’s understanding of God and the church.

• How do I understand
  ○ God?
  ○ what God is about?
  ○ what the congregation is about?

• What gets in the way of what the congregation is about?

• What constitutes help?

• What constitutes hope?

• What is my call as a clergy leader?

• What does it mean for me to be theotokos?

• How do I embody the love of God?

113 Kerr and Bowen, Family Evaluation, 104; Edwin Friedman, Workshop (Seattle, WA: 1995).
After thinking through these questions, or similar ones, one can employ the following questions to clarify sources of one’s thinking:

• How clear am I in my understanding?

• How similar and/or different is my thinking from that of my parents?

• How similar and/or different is my thinking from that of the congregation I serve and my larger denomination?

• Is my thinking a reaction to someone or something?

• How willing am I to articulate my thinking in a group where it might be different?

• What is my capacity to hold my own thinking without attempting to impose it on others, or to convince others of its validity?

This particular exercise can be done with a full range of beliefs, opinions, and principles. Although thoughtful development of a belief generally includes testing its consistency with factual knowledge and experience, the specific content of the belief may not be as important as is its development from within self.

Working on Self-in-System

One of the clergy research participants provided significant insight into the importance of work on self in BFST. He wrote, “this is not an ‘approach,’ it is a process of maturing.” He continued with “You must be dedicated to growing up,” and “the best way to apply the theory is to apply it to self.”
In pastoral care and leadership of congregations one’s work on self, which includes self-definition, self-regulation, and staying connected, is central. Working on self in system means always keeping in mind ways in which the emotional system operates, including ways in which one influences and is influenced by the system.

As indicated above, work in one’s own family of origin is crucial. This work includes not just learning about one’s family and its functioning over time, but moving into the family system by which one was shaped and maintaining a less-anxious, less-reactive, better-defined self within that system. It does not involve trying to change the system, or anyone in it. The focus always is on one’s own functioning. Bowen emphasizes that any differentiating effort has to be done for only for self. This is true whether the differentiating effort is in one’s nuclear family, family of origin, or the congregation. Bowen’s words are worth repeating:

If it [a differentiating effort] is done for self alone, and the effort is successful, the system automatically benefits also. If it is done primarily to help others or with the expectation that others will approve and express appreciation, the effort was for togetherness, and not for differentiation…

Any work on differentiation done in one’s family transfers into improved functioning in relationships with the congregation, and with the families of the congregation.

Although all work on differentiation involves self-definition, self-regulation, and staying connected, it helps to think of these as three inter-related yet separate aspects. By observing self carefully, it is possible to begin to recognize one’s responses as more or

---

114 Bowen, Family Therapy in Clinical Practice, 518.
less thoughtful and more or less reactive. Increased awareness of automatic reactive responses offers opportunities to explore the origin of those responses in one’s own life. For example, as a middle child with an older sister, it is not unusual for me to over-react to a woman (often a first-born) and perceive that she is telling me what I should do. With an understanding of what fuels my over-reaction, I am better able to decrease its intensity. Self-regulation and the accompanying idea of a less-anxious presence do not involve gritting one’s teeth in order to get through it. Rather, anxiety and reactivity are lessened through a combination of identifying their roots and understanding their relationship to the functioning of the broader emotional system.

Staying connected in relationships is perhaps the most difficult task when anxiety levels increase. Family of origin work is central in expanding one’s capacity to do this. The emotional processes of one’s family of origin are the ones to which an individual is most sensitive. Having grown up in them, they are automatic and often beyond awareness. Simultaneously, however, they may be experienced as constrictive and stifling, and produce reactivity. To maintain a self in one’s family of origin is a challenge. Bowen suggests that the beginning effort in family of origin work is to develop a relationship with each living person in one’s extended family. He describes a person-to-person relationship as “one in which two people can relate personally to each other about each other, without talking about others (triangling), and without talking
about impersonal ‘things.’” From the perspective of BSFT, expanding one’s capacity to stay connected to and relate in this way to one’s family of origin, especially when anxiety increases, is the best way to work on maturity. It expands one’s capacity to stay connected in all anxious relationships.

Despite the challenging and time-consuming nature of developing relationships with all families in the congregation, these efforts are important. A Bowen perspective on pastoral care and leadership suggests several additional reasons for their importance. First, knowing the families in the congregation helps a pastor to understand the congregational body as a whole—to identify how it has functioned over time, how anxiety flows, and how it has been managed or not managed over time. Second, a personal relationship somewhat reduces the intensity with which a member of the congregation projects a problem, attitude, or opinion onto another when anxiety rises. Third, (this is true especially in conflicted congregations) by moving toward individuals who have been identified as ‘the problem’ (whichever side they happen to be on) the clergy leader embodies his or her conceptualization of difficulties as systemic, and not located in an individual or a small group.

In the most difficult situations (e.g., direct conflict, or severe criticism) when staying connected is most challenging, it also is most important. Distancing in the face of criticism is an automatic, self-protective response. While distance is more comfortable,

115 Ibid., 540.
at least initially, it also can be damaging. A clergy person needs to be aware of the relationships that cause the greatest discomfort, and to move toward those individuals and families rather than away from them.

The following tasks and questions promote awareness of self in system: First, identify the primary triangles in which one plays a part, including those in the congregation (especially with the staff), in one’s own family, and between these ‘families.’ The following questions facilitate the identification of triangles:

• What are the major triangles in which I play a part?
• What is my functional position in these triangles?
• How does the anxiety flow?
• How are these triangles interconnected?
• Are there triangles that reach back to former staff members?

An awareness of the triangles in which one plays a part assists in understanding unexpected intensity of reactions, and in predicting the flow of anxiety.

Second, the clergyperson always must be aware of nodal points in the intersecting systems of which one is a part. During times of significant change in one’s own life, it is important to monitor shifts in one’s attention to the congregational system and reactions of congregation members to these shifts. For individuals in the congregation who have higher levels of sensitivity to important relationships, a pastor’s shift of focus to his or her own family situation may upset the comfortable balance of togetherness, and thus
may raise anxiety and reactivity. For example, despite the care and concern expressed at the time of the death of a clergy leader’s parent, the shift of the pastor’s attention and engagement away from the congregation, perceived by some as distancing, has the potential to produce completely unexpected reactions.

Third, the clergyperson must be aware of the level of responsibility he or she takes on to maintain a calm homeostasis in the congregational system, as well as in his or her own family system. To what extent does he or she adapt, overfunction, and absorb anxiety in order to maintain peace? Or, to what extent does the pastor disappear after ‘defining self’ to the system and finding that people are unhappy with him or her? Or, to what extent does the clergy leader over-react to reactions of others by willing them to change? Who carries the anxiety for the system? If it is the clergyperson, what does he or she do with it? What emotional processes are used to manage it?

Working on self-in-system is an ongoing project involving awareness of the intersecting systems, awareness of one’s own thinking, feeling, and behavior, and a willingness to work on differentiation.

Research and Experiments

An exercise that is helpful in maintaining connection to the system while not being completely immersed in it is to take a research stance. Based on an understanding of the congregational system, the clergyperson can develop a theory-based experiment.
He or she can form a hypothesis about what will happen if a certain action is taken, anticipate those reactions, and determine from whom they will come. The clergy person can ask, “What do I think my response will be to reactivity?” (This is a good opportunity to anticipate and work on self-regulation.) The next step is to take the action, observe responses, and compare the responses with one’s original hypothesis. Another approach is to anticipate responses to the action and develop a structure that has the potential to shift those responses. This can be done in the congregation, in the family, or in any emotional system to which one belongs.¹¹⁶

A situation at Second Church illustrates this activity. This congregation worked hard to maintain homeostasis and avoid changes and differences that might lead to conflict. I recognized this avoidance of change in the twitchiness of many in the congregation around the discussion of moving the Passing of the Peace from the end of worship to its more traditional location, before Eucharist. After having been in the congregation for six months, I developed an experiment. There were two levels to the experiment: one public, and the other private. The public experiment was to shift the Peace to its traditional location in the service. My private experiment was to determine how much capacity the congregation had to change, i.e., was the chronic anxiety so strong that it would inhibit any significant change? My hypothesis was that a few key

¹¹⁶ Bowen’s account of his “experiment” in working on differentiation within his family of origin, as well as within the “family therapy movement” is described in Chapter 21 of Ibid.
leaders in the congregation were more reactive than others, and that the congregation was more flexible than it appeared to be.

The most vocal opponent to this change, and the individual from whom I anticipated the greatest reactivity, was on the board. At the January board meeting I requested permission to experiment with moving the Peace on the Sundays during Lent. After explaining theological and liturgical reasons for making the change, and assuring the board that I would explain these things to the congregation as well, I made a request of the board members. Acknowledging that some of them had deep feelings about this issue, I asked them to be my ‘eyes and ears’ and assist me to gauge the response of the congregation to the change. I also asked them to do this from a neutral position, i.e., to not share their personal opinions with congregation members, but simply to watch and listen.

An Adult Forum was held following Lent to discuss the change. The individual who was most reactive to the change (who did a very good job of being neutral during Lent) was not present. The basic response of those in attendance was: “What’s the big deal? Of course, change it.”

A research stance is helpful on several levels. It provides an intentional way to maintain the larger, systemic picture and to think about the congregation as an emotional system. It helps a clergy leader to maintain curiosity about the system, and to be more
neutral. Finally, it is an opportunity to anticipate one’s own reactivity and think through how to manage it in a more mature manner.

Learning

The clergy research participants repeatedly voiced a need for a learning source for BFST, and a related need for continuing contact with others who see the world through this systems lens. Participants’ responses included:

- This is more caught than taught.
- It is hard to learn, circular and complicated.
- There is a need for resources familiar with the theory.
- It is difficult to find others who understand the challenge and benefits of this approach.

One participant summarized the feedback with the comment: “This is not a technique or quick fix for a short-term learning curriculum, but a life-long learning and growing process.” The shift of focus from the individual to the system is significant and difficult. However, the shift of focus from the other to self can be even more challenging.

Together, this group of six clergy respondents has worked with the theory for 110 years. Yet one of them commented, “I backslide into being a ‘fixer’ when I’m not working with the systems stuff in an ongoing way.” Another commented on the challenge of maintaining a systems conceptualization in the midst of a world that
understands problems from an individual perspective. “All previous assumptions have to be rethought—continually!” Kerr identifies these challenges in his discussion of trainees at the Bowen Center:

If trainees begin to grasp systems and then immerse themselves back into a setting that is thinking individual concepts, the trainees’ ability to retain a systems orientation will be eroded without their ever knowing it. What most works against the trainees’ retaining a systems orientation is their need for acceptance by the group they are involved with. They will begin to water down their systems ideas until they are acceptable to their colleagues… In other words, maintaining differentiation in the professional community is every bit as difficult as maintaining it in one’s own family.\(^\text{117}\)

Several times I have described BFST as a way of thinking that shapes a way of being. Kerr suggests that it may not be possible to learn Bowen theory just by attending workshops or reading about it. Friedman also suggests that

…a thorough grasp of Bowen theory is probably only achievable by studying the concepts over some period in the context of encountering one’s own experience of life while maintaining some type of disciple relationship with someone who has already gone through the process.\(^\text{118}\)

Because this way of thinking shapes a way of being, it is more than cognitive or intellectual. Learning is crucial, as in ongoing contact with others who think systems, whether a coach trained in BFST or a group of individuals with significant theoretical background. Working on differentiation is central to shaping a way of being that is more


\(^{118}\) Friedman, "Bowen Theory and Therapy," 139.
mature, and in relationship to congregations, is a significant means of care and leadership.

Responding to the Lure Toward Beauty and Emergence

Thus far, this discussion of pastoral care and leadership of congregations has focused on BFST. While I have not cited theological understandings, the emphasis on self-differentiation follows from Theological Proposition Three: *Differentiation is a process by which the Divine lures creation toward beauty. Differentiation promotes healing and nurtures the emergence of new phenomena.* I contend that work on differentiation is a positive response to the lure of the Divine.

There are several lines of enquiry that are helpful in thinking about intentional movement toward beauty. The first involves gaining a sense of one’s general response to the aspects involved in beauty and emergence throughout life. Asking oneself the following questions might guide this line of enquiry:

- Looking back through my ministry and life, can I identify experiences in which increased complexity and diversity have held together to form beauty?
- Have there been times when something new and unexpected has emerged from the intense harmony of this beauty?
- How have I met challenges of holding differences together?
• Have these experiences caused me anxiety, and how necessary has it been for me to resolve the differences quickly?

• What are my primary ways of working with differences and resolving anxiety?

Gaining a sense of situations in one’s life during which one has responded positively to the lure of the Divine toward beauty, as well as those times when the lure has been discernible but not met, assists one first to conceptualize these experiences as relative to God’s ongoing work in the world, and second, to identify one’s automatic responses to these challenges.

The second line of enquiry shifts the focus to life in the ‘here and now.’ Here one would ask questions such as

• Where do I sense the lure of the Divine at this point in my life?

• What possibilities for beauty might be present?

• How difficult is it to hold complexity together?

• How strong is the urge to simplify rather than allow the diversity to stand together?

• What aspects of the diversity may need to be reduced to the background?

• What aspects of the diversity may need to be prehended negatively?

The third line of enquiry concerns emergence, which I understand to be a potential outcome of the maximization of beauty in which a new phenomenon appears that then influences the complexity from which it arose. Emergence shapes something
new—something unexpected, unplanned, previously unimaginable. It is a serendipitous surprise born of a spirit of adventure. While one may respond intentionally to the lure toward beauty, emergence cannot be planned or programmed. Here one can only ask, How is my spirit of adventure and willingness to be surprised?

I suggest these questions as starting points for thinking about one’s own work on differentiation in care and leadership of congregations. They are by no means exhaustive. Again, working with a coach and/or a group of individuals with both theoretical and theological knowledge is helpful in exploring and extending these questions and in continuing work on one’s own differentiation.

**Congregational Care and Leadership: Promoting Differentiation**

In light of the description of a healthy emerging congregation, the concept of nurturing emergence, and the six theological propositions I have constructed, I now return to the study congregations to offer suggestions about healing and helpful responses by pastoral caregivers and pastoral leaders. Again, these are not techniques by which a pastor can heal a troubled congregation. Rather, these are ways of promoting the differentiation of the congregational system. As the differentiation of the congregational body increases, symptoms diminish and there is greater capacity to be *theotokos* to each other, neighbors, and the world. Friedman calls differentiation a broad-spectrum
antibiotic that promotes healing. I see differentiation as a process built into creation by which the Divine lures creation toward beauty.

Theological Proposition One posits that a norm for the life of a Christian congregation is a positive response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and emergence. Differentiation is central to healing, leadership, and a positive response to the lure of the Divine. The question to be addressed here is this: How does the pastoral caregiver/leader promote differentiation of a congregation, and thus promote the capacity of the faith community to respond to the lure of the Divine? The general response to this question refers one back to the previous section: all efforts by a leader to work on his or her differentiation of self serve to promote the differentiation of the congregation. Thus, many of the efforts described in the previous section easily transfer to the congregation. Specific responses to First Church and Second Church, the two troubled congregations in this study, exemplify this process. The descriptions and activities reviewed here include actual ways in which I worked with these congregations. No matter what the activity or project, however, the presence and being of the pastoral caregiver/leader are central to promoting healing and differentiation of a congregation, and to helping it respond positively to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and emergence.
Decreasing Anxiety

As with all anxious families, the effects of high levels of anxiety thwart the capacity of a congregation to move toward differentiation and beauty. Thus the earliest efforts include decreasing anxiety. Both First Church and Second Church were highly anxious congregations but they expressed and managed their anxiety in different ways.

The members of First Church expressed their anxiety through escalating conflict and discord. These responses diminished their ability to function as *theotokos* and to embody God’s love. Differences had become destructive, anxiety and reactivity had been feeding each other in ever-escalating cycles, and among those who were most polarized there appeared to be little potential for less reactive exchanges. At the time I worked with the congregation, many were concerned about the survival of the faith community.

In addition to the presence and being of a less anxious of the leader, there are several that can help calm this level of intense anxiety. The first involves clarifying the presence of the Divine in the midst of the turmoil. One research respondent told of beginning his first sermon in a troubled congregation with his standard greeting, “Grace to you and peace,” then asking people to listen carefully as he repeated it twice more, each time with an emphasis on the word *peace*. This acknowledged the turmoil while simultaneously placing it within the healing and hopeful presence of the Divine.

The second task involves defining self. This includes clarifying one’s role and responsibility in the congregation as well as one’s understanding of the problems the
congregation is experiencing. A troubled faith community often is desperate for a “quick fix” and/or a savior. When the clergyperson makes it clear that his or her role is to help the members help themselves, emphasizing their strengths and resources, and articulating God’s ongoing presence and possibilities, the clergyperson embodies self-definition. Many members of a troubled faith community also are looking for someone to blame, i.e., for an easy, cause and effect explanation for their problems. By clarifying one’s systems perspective of the problems, i.e., that everybody owns a piece of it, one indicates that he or she will not enter the blame game, and that the pastor’s work is with the congregation as a whole.

The third important task in a highly reactive and conflicted congregation involves setting boundaries and ground-rules for behavior. In general, BFST therapy is not directive. In the midst of intense reactivity, however, I have developed several guidelines for acceptable behavior: (1) Talk to people, not about them; (2) No parking lot meetings; and (3) Remember the Golden Rule. These guidelines build on a systems framework for understanding the intensity in the congregation. They focus on ways in which anxiety spreads through congregations and ways in which members’ behavior can exacerbate and or inhibit the process. By clarifying acceptable behavior and placing it within a faith context, these guidelines actually extend the task of defining self.

The initial tasks at Second Church were somewhat different. Their anxiety, expressed through giving up self and triviality, had led to lethargy and an inability to
function as *theotokos*, embodying God’s love. When I first arrived the members did not seem concerned about the congregation’s survival. However, as I came to know this faith community it became obvious that they questioned their ability to survive another major upheaval. In this lethargic congregation, members simply denied differences. As a coping mechanism, their denial was so successful that most seemed unaware that they had differences. Thus the task at Second Church was to bring differences to a level of awareness that allowed the anxiety to surface, and then to stay connected as a less-anxious presence and being, allowing differences to exist but with less reactivity.

I had been in the congregation several months before I began to identify this fear as the primary variable in the congregation’s lethargy. The experiment described in the last section was designed to bring some differences to the surface, and to observe how the congregation responded to them. Looking back, however, I am able to identify additional indicators of anxiety. For example, now I realize the efforts of a few individuals to recruit me to a side that was not clearly defined were actually attempts to triangle me into uneasy relationships. Rather than ignoring these attempts because I did not understand them, a better response on my part would have been to remain emotionally neutral while asking questions that surfaced the issue or revealed the position the member wanted me to take. Once one side surfaced, I could have brought the other side into the open as well. For example, having realized the extent of the intensity around the same-gender couple in the congregation, I could have raised it in a manner that focused on the *differing* caused...
by the differences, rather than on the content of the differences themselves. I could have observed, “Wow, I didn’t even realize this was still an issue” and asked the leaders, “What do you think?” A question asked of the leaders, will spread quickly through the system, and anxiety will increase. At that point, the aim is to reduce the anxiety about differences without denying the differences.

Being present in a highly conflicted congregation is difficult. It requires maintaining relationships with anxious others without absorbing or reacting to their anxiety, and without passing their anxiety on to others through triangles. It entails keeping a broad view of how emotional systems operate (including one’s own family), and observing the part one plays in the system. It calls for the capacity to hold one’s own position in face of opposition from others, but not attempting to convert the other to one’s position. Another challenge involves being in the congregation to help, yet holding the understanding that willing an individual or congregation to change—even in ways that obviously are helpful—is not help.

A less-anxious emotional being and presence is hopeful. It is grounded in assumptions that the congregation has strengths and resources on which they can draw, and that the Divine continually offers graceful possibilities to move toward beauty. Some members of First Church worried about the survival of their congregation. They had moved into black and white thinking in which they assumed the only options were a return to the way things were in the past, or death. Second Church was stuck, caught in

321
its past and unable to consider changes that would allow it to be more responsive and adaptive to its context. Knowing that a return to the past is neither realistic nor faithful, a leader with a hopeful presence recognizes a broader range of options and sees them as possibilities to respond to the lure of the Divine toward beauty.

A less-anxious emotional being and presence is respectfully curious. It allows the clergyperson to approach the congregation as research project on the human phenomenon. A systems lens allows observation of the emotional processes of the congregation and its constituent families, and identification of ways in which they have interacted to create and contribute to the difficulties. As has been said many times in this work, congregations are complex systems comprised of multiple complex systems. A congregation offers a fascinating opportunity to observe intersecting emotional systems. A curious leader does not seek to psychoanalyze individuals or families or even the congregation. Rather, the leader watches and wonders about how the emotional system is functioning, while regulating self and thinking theory.

At First Church, the resignations of staff members, and especially the senior pastor, led to serious concerns about whether any pastor, even an interim, would want ever want to work with them. They were concerned that they had a reputation for being a ‘clergy-killer’ congregation. At Second Church, conversations around the loss of half of their members several years earlier were off limits, as were conversations about members who had left more recently. These things were secrets that, it appeared, were considered
best left unexplored. In both congregations, an attitude of curiosity about the human phenomenon and how congregations function rather than an investigation into who and what caused the problems lessened the anxiety that contributed to the escalation of troubles.

A less-anxious emotional being and presence is emotionally neutral, i.e., has greater capacity to see reciprocity and not take sides. When the clergyperson begins with the assumption that everybody owns a piece of the problem, he or she forestalls attempts to blame. This leader stays connected and defines self, but without an emotional investment in changing the viewpoint of others. When there are polarizations, as there were at First Church, some members attempt to recruit the clergyperson to particular positions and interpretations of the problems. In situations like Second Church, with its avoidance of difference and change, a clergy leader who intentionally initiates change automatically sets off reciprocal efforts to change back. Working on emotional neutrality, it is possible to maintain connections with people in multiple positions—even those who are unhappy with a change—to hear the sides of others but not to take a side, and to do so without trying to convince them that they are all wrong.

A less anxious emotional being and presence may even be playful. The response of individuals and the congregation as a whole to playfulness is an indicator of the level of anxiety. For example, during my report to First Church at the end of the assessment process, I played a tongue-in-cheek song about a pastoral search committee’s prayer for
God to send them “The Perfect Pastor.” The committee informs the Deity, “a little less than an angel will be fine because we’re tired of the plain old human kind.” Among other things, the perfect pastor

visits all the needy and is in the office every day,
has 40 years experience at age 38, and
isn’t greedy… he’ll take just what you give him and then give it all away.119

By watching the congregation as the song was playing, I was able to see who still was quite reactive and who was beginning to move toward the future. There were a few downright scowls amid a fair amount of nervous laughter and several great guffaws. The intensity of the anxiety had decreased significantly, but it was obvious that it would not take much to restart the anxious chain reactions.

In addition to gauging the level of anxiety, playfulness also can lessen it. It must be used carefully, however. Initial efforts best are pointed at self and not taking one’s self too seriously. Directing humor at oneself helps to take the leader out of the responsibility trap of being the expert who is going to fix all the problems. As people get to know a pastoral leader and realize that he or she is not going to berate them, they are more likely to hear playfulness as describing the human condition in which we are all caught rather than as criticism of them.

A sense of playfulness is most helpful in reducing the anxiety of the caregiver/leader, which then, of course, helps reduce the anxiety of the broader system. Simply

thinking about a playful response draws on the intellectual system and reduces focus on others as well as one’s receptivity to anxiety. Simply wondering what a playful response might be, without saying anything, is a way to practice being a less-anxious and reactive being and presence.

Promoting Differentiation

As a leader stands in the midst of an anxious system in relationship with members of the system, with one’s thinking, feeling, and behavior determined more by self than by automatic responses to others, others in the system are more likely to shift their own automatic responses. Although the differentiation of the clergy caregiver/leader is central, there are additional tasks that can promote the differentiation of the congregational body. The first tasks involve promoting self-definition of individuals in the congregation as well as the congregation as a whole. The next tasks relate to developing a systems framework through which it is possible to understand what inhibits and promotes the congregation’s efforts to function as they desire. A third group of tasks involves promoting the strengths of the congregation and its capacity to respond to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and emergence. These tasks focus on identifying and strengthening leaders.

The tasks around self-definition include the questions suggested above for clergy leaders: “What do I think? What do I believe?” In using these questions with the
congregation, however, it is necessary to develop an atmosphere in which it is possible to have different answers to the same questions, and/or to not be sure of what one thinks. The extent to which a clergy leader is able to be clear about his or her own thinking while being curious and open to the thinking of others impacts the extent to which congregation members are able to do so as well. Although desired outcomes of this process of congregational self-definition include greater clarity of the understanding of the Divine the congregation bears to each other, neighbor, and the world, as well as greater clarity of how they embody the love of God, it is not necessary that everyone believe the same thing. A harmony of contrasts is a response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty, and it is possible to have a general, larger view of the Divine that is held, while more specific assumptions vary. The very process of discussing differences in beliefs is a positive response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and emergence.

At Second Church, a portion of the process of self-definition took the form of a congregational visioning workshop related to the work of the pastoral search committee. The responses of members to survey questions about their perceptions of healthy congregations were compiled and presented during the workshop. As presenter, I reviewed all of the submitted answers, including the one that said, “a healthy congregation has a male pastor.” It was important that I present this answer in a neutral way, respecting the viewpoint. By remaining neutral, I made it clear that negative responses of many workshop participants to this misogynistic point of view were their
responses, and that I was not imposing my view on the congregation as a whole. The neutrality of my response set the tone for allowing different ideas.

As the workshop progressed, small groups worked to answer the question: “What is God calling Second Church to be and do?” Although the task of bringing all the ideas together was not accomplished during that meeting, the process of talking about beliefs and assumptions about God, and what the Church is in light of those assumptions, while simultaneously accepting, respecting, and sometimes struggling with differences, began the congregations’ process of self-definition.

The second group of tasks relates to developing a systems framework through which it is possible to better understand those things that inhibit and promote the congregation’s capacity to respond to the lure of God. Congregations often understand their difficulties to be caused by problems or pathology of individual members. Congregations that are stuck, whether in conflict or lethargy, need to understand the experiences that seem to be out of control. Offering a systems framework and conceptualization of problems can give congregations a way to understand what has happened, as well as what might be helpful.

The goal here is not to teach BFST to a congregation. Rather, it is to offer a way of thinking about the issues that can help people calm down, lessen the blaming and/or guilt, and think about how they might move ahead. Members and leaders develop a common language with which they are able to identify and name processes present in the
congregation as well as in their families. Even minimal understanding is helpful, particularly when the leader reinforces this understanding in his or her communication and relationships with the congregation.

“Healthy Congregations” material is helpful in teaching this thinking to congregations in a formal way. It can lay a foundation on which to build through time—for the congregation as a whole as well as with families in the congregation. A common response to Healthy Congregations workshops often has been, “this is exactly what goes on in my family.”

In my experience, some individuals make connections between the basic systems concepts they have learned formally and the functioning of the congregational leader. From these connections, they begin to work more on their own differentiation in both their families, and the congregation. These individuals begin to take on leadership positions in their families and in the faith community.

As the clergyperson uses systems concepts, and as others begin to learn, a common language develops—almost a shorthand. Both First Church and Second Church had several Healthy Congregations workshops. Thus, when terms such as triangles, anxiety and reactivity were used, there was a common understanding. Although not everyone in a congregation participates, it is important that lay leaders and staff members do so in order to hold a common conceptualization.

---

120 Steinke, Healthy Congregations; ———, Healthy Congregations Workshop Facilitator Manual.
The third group of tasks helpful in promoting differentiation in and of a congregation focuses on encouraging and developing the strengths of the congregation and its capacity to respond to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and emergence. The primary work here involves identifying and strengthening lay leaders in the congregation. 

Both Bowen and Friedman found it helpful to identify the individual within a family system with the greatest capacity for maturity and change, and to work with that person rather than with the family as a whole. As one individual in a system works on differentiation, the rest of the system begins to reorganize around that individual and to function better. To this point, I have assumed that a clergyperson working on differentiation is the one around whom the system begins to reorganize and pull up its functioning. I speculate that one variable in the stability of a shift toward better functioning is the length of time the clergy leader is in the congregation. Although raising up additional leaders is important in all congregations, the shorter the time a leader spends in a congregation, the greater the need to encourage the congregation’s resources and defenses.

As with individuals and families, the goal in a congregation is to increase the differentiation of the congregational body. If the congregation functions better only in relationship to the pastoral caregiver/leader, functional differentiation has increased, but the basic level has not. Once that pastor leaves the congregation, the capacity to function in a healthier way will diminish. Whether individual or family therapy, or help for
congregations, the goal is always to increase differentiation. Those in the congregation who work to increase differentiation are the faith community’s leaders—whether official or unofficial.

At Second Church I worked with the board and with the pastoral search committee to develop systems conceptualizations of challenges, events, and the history of the congregation. I invited the board to assist with the experiment of changing the liturgy. I often questioned this group about the congregation’s purpose and the role of elected leaders within it. Despite their frustration, I refused to give them my definitions and challenged them to work on this themselves. Although questions and discussions such as these are more difficult in the early stages of work with highly conflicted congregations like First Church, as anxiety and reactivity begin to decrease, they are crucial.

Especially in interim situations, it is important to help lay leaders broaden the lens through which they view and understand the congregation, its call, its situation, and its context. It is crucial that the congregation—in particular, its lay leadership—gain some clarity of self-definition, vision, and purpose which can be brought into dialogue with potential pastoral candidates. Again, this is the challenge of holding differences together in order to allow a more intense harmony and in order to respond positively to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and emergence.
Third Church

I have defined a healthy, emerging congregation as one that responds to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and is open to emergence—serendipitous surprise. This understanding of the Divine shapes the ways in which the congregation is theotokos, the presence of God’s differentiating, life-seeking, graceful and creative relationship with the universe. Health of a congregation, from this perspective, is not a final goal to be attained. Rather, it is a way of being that is able to respond creatively to differences and to adapt successfully to changes and challenges, all the while guided by a deep understanding of its participation in the ongoing creativity of the Divine.

Third Church, introduced in Chapter 2, experienced severe challenges related to the resignation of a long-term, popular pastor, and the subsequent court order that prevented disclosure of facts surrounding the situation. The congregation was hurt, highly conflicted, and in great turmoil. The pastor who was called to the congregation in the midst of the aftermath had a strong background in systems thinking, and had worked previously with conflicted congregations. He now has served this congregation for about fifteen years.

Third Church now fulfills the vision for a healthy emerging congregation as a community of faith that

• Is continually seeking to grasp, articulate and embody an understanding of the Divine as ongoing creativity that is on the side of life in the fullest sense.
• Views working with differences and changes as challenges and opportunities to respond positively to the lure of the Divine toward beauty.

• Frees up spirituality, and nurtures differentiation of self and maturity as a way of being that allows individuals as well as the congregational body to be theotokos to each other, neighbor, and world, to embody the lure and love of God, and to participate with the Divine as created co-creators.

Although it is unlikely that the congregation and its leaders would describe the above vision as theirs, in my estimation Third Church meets these criteria. There are several indicators of this.

One is a new building project on the church property. In the middle of downtown, the congregation is constructing a twenty-six unit building that includes community and office space in addition to living units. Half of the living units are designated as ‘permanently affordable.’ The creativity of this project strikes me as an embodiment of the Divine’s purpose of promoting life, as well as a way to meet needs of the congregation’s ongoing ministry. Despite the challenges of a project of this size, the congregation and its leaders have worked to make it a reality. I interpret this project as emergence, as a serendipitous surprise that could happen only as the congregation deepened its capacity to be different-together, and to respond positively to the lure of the Divine toward beauty.
Another indicator of health is the congregation’s ongoing project of self-definition. Although this was part of the early work of the pastor in the process of healing, it was not a one-time project. Periodically the congregation returns to look at its mission statement, its identity, its community, and the way in which it is functioning to embody the love of God. All these aspects are brought into conversation to consider movement into the future.

Third Church did not leap instantly from being a deeply troubled congregation to a healthy, emerging one. There was no quick fix. In my interview of the pastor, he described the challenge of holding in his mind a picture of the larger system and ways in which anxiety and reactivity flowed through it. He also described the challenge of maintaining a less-anxious presence in the midst of tremendous frustration and anger. It is interesting to me that as the focus of the congregation shifted from ‘our healing’ to ‘our ministry,’ their capacity to be theotokos and embody the love of God grew. Although there were difficulties, I would describe much of the pastor’s work as inhibiting the inhibitors and promoting the strengths.

Conclusions

The purpose of this project has been to develop a pastoral theology of congregational care and leadership. To do so, I have brought together an interpretation of BFST and Friedman’s work with it in relationship to clergy, congregations, and
leadership, with aspects of process theology. A centerpiece of the project has been use of BFST to understand better the functioning of congregations and “what is help.” A process conceptualization of reality, of the Divine in relationship to creation, and the purposes of the Divine have allowed the placement of the helpful variable of differentiation of self within a much larger, theological and spiritual framework.

The first of the theological propositions that undergird this project names a response to the lure of the Divine toward beauty and emergence as a norm for the life of a Christian congregation. Thus, congregations are called to be on the side of life, and on the side of ongoing, evolving creativity. In light of this teleology, the concepts of BFST offer ways to name and address inhibitors of movement toward beauty, and ways to promote that movement through differentiation.

BFST offers a way of thinking about the nature of human relationships and behavior that shapes a way of being in relationships that contributes to the maturity and well-being of the individual as well as the larger system. Because the focus is on one’s thinking, BFST does not lend itself to a checklist of activities, goals, or techniques to be followed in order to make a congregation healthy. Because the focus of BFST is on one’s differentiation of self within the relationship system as the primary therapeutic and leadership tool, I focus on the presence and being of a clergy leader working on differentiation of self as the primary variable in nurturing emergence. I also have argued that work on differentiation connects one with natural forces in creation, forces that

334
contribute to life in the broadest sense and allow pastoral caregivers, pastoral leaders, families, and congregations to participate in God’s ongoing project in creation.

Shortcomings/Challenges

This project has presented several challenges related to the breadth of pastoral theological projects in general, and more specifically, to the somewhat unrealistic nature of bringing together a process metaphysics and natural systems theory of human behavior in order to address congregational care. I have been guided throughout this project by a commitment to a broad vision in which it is possible to draw congruent connections between basic faith commitments and a secular theory of human behavior. Thus, I have resisted efforts to reduce the scope of the project.

The combination of practical care and theology in the discipline of pastoral theology is an interesting and challenging enterprise. Analysis of the practical situation of care requires models of research that draw from the social sciences. The concrescence of theology and cognate theory is much more theoretical and imaginative. The actual role of research in this work has been somewhat ambiguous. I employ research with congregations as well as with the clergy group illustratively rather than using it in an attempt to prove the validity of BFST.

If I were to begin the project again, there are some aspects of the research that I would do differently. First, I would convene an ongoing group of clergy with
background in BFST to discuss my study congregations, as well as their own experiences in congregations. Clergy working with the theory have much more to contribute to this discussion than was requested in my questionnaire. Second, I would expand the research with congregations to include interviews with former pastors. Third, I would develop a more consistent format to use with various participating congregations. Differences in the amount and quality of contact with the three study congregations in this project make it difficult to do comparisons. Despite these challenges in research, the illustrative use of the research has been helpful.

Future Possibilities

I wish to reiterate the importance of a focus on congregations in theological education, in general, and pastoral theology, in particular. Congregations and their leaders face many challenges. Throughout this work I have identified ways in which anxiety hinders and exacerbates the ability of any organism—including a congregation—to respond to change and challenge. I also have identified differentiation of self as a primary way to respond to anxiety. Theological education prepares women and men to serve as leaders in congregations in a time when the rate of change is accelerating and anxiety is rising. The curriculum of many seminaries emphasizes necessary areas of study for ministry, including scripture, theology, history, ethics, pastoral care, social justice, worship, preaching, and polity, but I do not find sufficient attention to
congregations and leadership. I believe that it is crucial for students who will be leading congregations to gain a sense of how congregations function as ‘bodies,’ and to have opportunities to explore and mature their own functioning within relationship systems. If the presence and being of the clergy leader is a primary variable influencing the health of a congregation, I believe that strengthening that variable should be a part of theological education and leadership formation.

It seems to me that the discipline of pastoral theology is the logical location for such an endeavor. Concerned with the care of souls, pastoral theologians must attend to the soul and being of pastoral leaders, who contribute to the soul and being of congregations, which in turn contribute to the soul and being of the congregations’ families as well as the broader society. The commitment of pastoral theology to draw on the best theories offered regarding human behavior and functioning and to bring those into dialogue with theology provides the necessary foundation for this work.

Serendipitous Surprises!

I have offered a definition of emergence as serendipitous surprise. Thus, I close this dissertation by describing first, two surprises, and then, one serendipitous surprise I have experienced during the development of this dissertation.

The first surprise is somewhat disconcerting: Congregations and the crucial nature of congregational care and leadership receive minimal focus from academic
theology. Granted, pastoral care is practical theology, but congregations are places where many people encounter the Divine. Their health and care, in my opinion, would benefit if they received greater attention from leaders of theological education.

The second surprise is my conclusion that, for the most part, care and leadership are synonymous. In beginning this project, I assumed there was some essential difference between them. In the wider literature, they are seen as different activities with different goals. At this point, however, I see little difference. To me it seems possible that pastoral care and pastoral leadership could be taught in complementary ways.

I label the final surprise serendipitous because it is an unexpected emergence from the concrescence of BFST and process theology that, I believe, has the potential to reshape my thinking about the congregations. Once again, I return to a basic assumption, but with a slight variation: The way in which one thinks about God governs the way in which one responds to God. I have come to believe that a view of reality as process, and an understanding of the Divine as luring humans into the ongoing, creative process of maximizing beauty may be a central variable in the future vitality of the church. An assumption that God is unchanging undergirds efforts by congregations to keep things the same. Yet in a world that is changing quickly, these congregations struggle. I believe it is possible that a shift to a process conceptualization of the Divine can help congregations align with the forces in nature that are on the side of life, and congruent with God’s direction in creation. I contend that rather than positing a positive response to the lure of
the Divine toward beauty as a norm for congregational life, it should be posited as the norm.

In light of my personal commitment to respect other ways of thinking about God, I hesitate to assert that the process conceptualization offered here is better or more theologically accurate than any other conceptualization. Yet, I find myself captured by the possibility that the health of the church and its congregations may be connected to its capacity to conceptualize the Divine in a way that is consistent with the nature of ever changing reality, and to respond by participating with the Divine in this ongoing creative, life-promoting dance. Pastoral care, pastoral leadership, pastoral theology—finally lead to ecclesiology. Surprise!
REFERENCES


Cobb, John B. "Prehension." Philosophy Department, University of Budapest, 2002.


DeYoung, Kevin, Ted Kluck, and David F. Wells. "Why We're Not Emergent (by Two Guys Who Should Be)." Moody Publishers, 2008.


———. *Friedman's Fables*. New York


346


The proposed study is in conjunction with a dissertation (Joint Ph.D. Program, Iliff and DU), the purpose of which is to draw on aspects of Bowen Family Systems Theory and process theology to develop a pastoral theology of congregational care. Pastoral theology begins with situations of human suffering and need, and draws on theological and psychological resources in order to construct new understandings of the situation and to develop principles to guide care. The situations of need addressed in this project are congregations that are experiencing difficulties in living out their mission, as they understand it. The specific difficulties addressed are ongoing conflict and lethargy. The focus of the study is consistently on congregations and clergy leaders, not on individual members of the faith communities. The thesis of the dissertation is that pastoral care and leadership of congregations hold in common the purpose of “nurturing emergence,” and that a primary variable in this process is the nature of the clergyperson’s presence and being in relationship the congregation as a whole, and to the congregation as a whole.
Data for this project will be gathered from three congregations and from a group of clergy who have significant experience in the application of Bowen Theory to congregations and leadership. The three congregations are representative of those experiencing ongoing conflict, lethargy, and/or healthy functioning. Data for the first two congregations were gathered by the author while serving as a consultant and interim pastor. Permission was given by both to use the information in a study, on the understanding of confidentiality. The third congregation will be selected upon recommendation of Bishop of the Rocky Mountain Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Through study of historical documents, attendance at worship, and interviews of clergy and several key congregational leaders, the following information will be gathered: 1) a history of the congregation, including essential growth patterns, clergy and staff turnover, periods of conflict; 2) the congregation’s mission and ways in which it has understood and lived its mission through the years; 3) an assessment of how the congregation has dealt with differences; 4) the congregation’s vision for the future; and 5) description(s) of ways in which clergy have exercised leadership functions of the congregation. This information was gathered previously from the first two congregations.

Clergy leaders will be asked to describe their experiences with the application of Bowen Theory to their work in congregations, and to offer evaluation of its helpfulness. All the information gathered will be used to illustrate the need for, and expand
understandings of pastoral care and leadership of congregations, especially in conjunction with Bowen Theory and Process Theology.

Because there is little or no risk to participants, and because of the confidential nature of the study, I am requesting an expedited approval process from the IRB.

**Proposed Use of Human Subjects**

Congregations, as ‘wholes’, and the leaders of congregations are the foci of this study. To supplement data previously gathered from experiences with two congregations, I will be interviewing the pastor and several key leaders from one additional ‘healthy’ congregation. Questions will focus on the functioning of the congregation over time, and on ways in which the clergy leaders have related to the congregation. I will request permission to audiotape the interviews for my personal use. The name of the congregation, as well as the names of subjects will be confidential. In addition to the congregation, I will send a questionnaire to approximately 15 members of a clergy group that focuses on applications of Bowen Theory to leadership in congregations, a group with which the author has been meeting for a decade. Again, the focus will be on the functioning of clergy leaders and the functioning of congregations. If appropriate and necessary, a phone interview will follow the questionnaire. I anticipate no risk to any participants.
Appendix B

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR CLERGY GROUP PARTICIPANTS

1. How long have you been studying/applying concepts of Bowen Family Systems Theory to your work as a clergy leader?

2. What first attracted you to this theoretical approach?

3. In what ways has your leadership style/functioning changed through the use of this approach?

4. In what ways has this approach impacted the congregation(s) in which you have served?

5. What is most challenging in using this theory in your ministry?

6. What is most helpful?

7. What is least helpful?

8. Based on your experience, please describe a helpful way that a leader could learn this theory and begin to apply it in his or her work as a clergy leader.

9. Please describe several specific instances in which you found significant help in using this approach.

10. Please describe several specific instances in which you did not find this approach helpful.
Appendix C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR KEY LEADERS OF A HEALTHY CONGREGATION

(Variations in questions for pastor(s) are indicated in parentheses.)

1. Personal information about interview participants will be gathered. This includes the number of years they have been members, their level of participation, programs in which they and their family have been active, experiences in other congregations, and participation in the wider church. (For the pastor(s), this will include previous experiences in parish ministry.)

2. Please describe your congregation. What is its history? What are its strengths? What are its weaknesses? What challenges does it face?

3. What is the mission/vision of the congregation? How is it being lived out?

4. What plans for the future does the congregation have?

5. How are differences handled in this congregation? How is conflict approached?

6. How do you understand the role of the pastor in this congregation?

7. Please describe how the pastor(s) of this congregation (you) relate to staff, lay leadership, and members. If you have experienced several different pastors serving this congregation, please describe this for each of them.

8. How would you describe your pastor’s (your) leadership style?

These questions will serve as a guide, and may be supplemented or adjusted during the interview process. Historical information about the congregation – using annual reports, newsletters and other written documents – will have been gathered prior to the interviews.
FIRST CHURCH SMALL GROUP INTERVIEWS

Questions for Discussion
(In no particular order)

What have you observed in the way things are done at First Church that bothers you?

Is there something or has there been something at First Church that people do not want to discuss?

What are two strengths of the congregation?

What do you see as weaknesses of the congregation?

Do you have any idea about why the problems and conflict happened last year? What were the triggers?

Does this recent time of conflict remind you of other events or circumstances here?

What are the greatest needs of the congregation? How can you help meet those needs?

How can what First Church has gone through (and is going through) be constructive?

If you had the power and responsibility to change things at First Church, what would you do?

What are your dreams for First Church? What would it look like if First Church were healthy and happy?
Appendix D

PERCEPTIONS OF HEALTHY CONGREGATIONS SURVEY

1. In your mind, picture a healthy congregation. Jot down words or phrases to describe it.

2. Picture relationships between members of a healthy congregation. What are they like? Jot down words or phrases to describe these relationships.

3. Think about ways the members of the Congregation Council lead a healthy congregation. Again, please use words or phrases to describe the ways they lead and how they relate to the members of the congregation.

4. Describe how the pastor(s) of a healthy congregation relate to the members.

5. How does a healthy congregation relate to the wider church?

6. Describe ways a healthy congregation relates to the community around it.

7. Imagine a healthy congregation. What makes it different from a congregation that isn’t healthy?

8. If there are any other characteristics of healthy congregations that you have not described already, please describe them here.
Appendix E

GUIDE FOR CONGREGATIONAL ASSESSMENT

The Presenting Problem/Primary Symptom

Listen to perceptions of the “presenting problem”. Meet with each of the key leaders in the congregation. Also, invite 10 – 12 members of the congregation to meet and present their views. It is possible to meet with small groups, however in those cases it is crucial that participants understand that they are speaking only of their own views and experiences, they are to listen respectfully to each other, and the content of the meeting is confidential. Having participants speak directly to the leader, allowing others in the group to “overhear” their statements is a helpful conceptualization of this process.

• Ask factual questions, such as:
  ○ What is the problem?
  ○ When did it begin?
  ○ Has it been better or worse at times?
  ○ Who is involved?
  ○ Who is complaining?
  ○ How has it impacted you?
  ○ In what ways do you see it impacting the congregation?
  ○ What has been the course of the problem?
  ○ What solutions have been tried? How have they worked/not worked?

• Listen carefully, without taking sides. The more emotionally objective, calm, thoughtful, and curious the pastor is, the more likely the anxiety will lessen and the “speakers” will become a little more thoughtful.

• Try to discern the different “versions”, “understandings” and proposed “solutions” to the “problem. Each person will have his or her own interpretation of the problem, its cause, and what needs to be done.

• It is natural that each person will attempt, subtly or not, to triangle you into his or her point of view.

• Although you will hear feelings, acknowledge them but do not focus on them.
• Listen for themes in different conversations, although this is not about “majority rules”

• Try to discern the degree of polarization

• Try to discern the intensity of anxiety and seriousness:
  o Are some individuals less reactive and more thoughtful?
  o How much blaming is there?
  o Does anyone take responsibility for part of the problem?
  o Is there any creativity or playfulness?

• Questions that underlie this data gathering process include:
  o Why this particular problem/symptom?
  o Why is this individual or group?
  o Why now?

Note that questions asked are primarily factual, asking who, what, when, and how. The why questions noted above are questions in the mind of the person leading the assessment, and are intended to help identify the emotional process that has contributed to the problem.

The Congregation Now

• Facts about the leaders of the congregational relationship system.
  o Make a list of all clergy (including yourself and your immediate predecessor), staff members, elected lay leaders, non-elected leaders, and central ‘players’ in the “presenting problem”. For each of these individuals, gather the following information:
    ▪ Length of time in the congregation
    ▪ Leadership roles over the years
    ▪ Responsibilities
    ▪ Sibling position
    ▪ Relationship to other families in the congregation (e.g., are parents or sibling’s families active?)
    ▪ Are there significant/known stressors they are facing now?
    ▪ Is there discernible relational closeness or tension with other leaders?
• Clarity of Mission
  o Is the mission statement relevant to the current congregation?
  o Does the congregation leadership know the mission statement?
  o Do congregation members know the mission statement?

• Stressors and Anxiety (acute and chronic)
  o What are the more general challenges being faced by the congregation?
  o What challenges are being presented from the congregational context?
  o Are there particular issues that have raised the level of anxiety and reactivity?
  o Assess the level of acute anxiety in the congregation (in response to an actual threat).
  o Assess the level of chronic anxiety in the congregation (in response to perceived threat).
    ▪ What is the history of this chronic anxiety, i.e., is there an identifiable issue in the history of the congregation (or in the history of congregations in which key leaders have been active, or congregations in the area)?
    ▪ Is the chronic anxiety being ‘stirred up’ at this point?

• The flow of anxiety:
  o Emotional triangles
    ▪ Identify the major triangles currently active. Note the positions (inside/outside) of individuals in these triangles. Triangles may include:
      • Pastor, former pastor, ____________.
      • Pastor, congregation, council
      • Pastor, staff member, program
      • Pastor, spouse (or family member), congregation
      • Pastor, staff member, congregation
    ▪ What existing triangles have you, as a new pastor, stepped into?
    ▪ In relationship to the “presenting problem”, what triangles were active, and how did they function?
    ▪ What are the interlocking triangles?
  o Anxiety binding mechanisms in the congregational emotional process (nuclear family emotional process)
    ▪ Is it possible to identify a primary pattern currently being used by the congregation to bind anxiety (e.g., distancing, conflict, dysfunction of a primary leader, dysfunction of another staff member)?
• Are there other patterns obvious as well?
• What symptoms are present in the staff, key leaders, and their nuclear families? (Symptoms can be physical, emotional, or social.)

• Additional Internal Stressors

• External Stressors

• Challenges in the congregation, families in the congregation, and community

• Changes in the congregation, families in the congregation, and community

The Congregational History

Develop a history of the congregation through which it is possible to discern the congregational emotional process, challenges experienced, and resources to respond. Gather the following information:

• The birth of the congregation:
  ○ Denominational affiliation?
  ○ What was the impetus for starting this congregation? (e.g., judicatory mission start, independent group, congregational split)

• Develop a chronological chart with the following information for each year (or for each year for which the information is available).
  ○ Year
  ○ Total membership
  ○ Average worship attendance
  ○ Sunday School attendance
  ○ Income
  ○ Expenses
  ○ Benevolence
  ○ Clergy
  ○ Clerical Staff/Professional Staff
  ○ Additions and deletions
  ○ Challenges
  ○ Joys
  ○ Other categories you might find helpful
• Note the following:
  ○ Sharp increases/decreases in any of the numerical categories
  ○ Average clergy tenure (if there is a period during which the tenures are significantly shorter, note the average for that period)
  ○ Frequent turnover in staff
  ○ Building programs
  ○ Describe the “Challenges” and “Joys”

• Clergy: to the extent that is possible, gather the following information about former clergy in the congregation:
  ○ Nuclear family configuration
  ○ General functioning,
    ▪ Overfunctioning/underfunctioning in relationship with congregation?
    ▪ any significant physical, emotional, and/or social symptoms and their impact on the congregation
  ○ The nuclear family emotional process
  ○ Sibling position in family of origin
  ○ The functional position(s) of the pastor within his or her family of origin, nuclear family, and congregation
  ○ Functioning of nuclear family members, including symptoms and their impact on the congregation
  ○ Congregational experience prior to serving this congregation, including reason for leaving previous position
  ○ Reason for leaving this congregation (especially if tenure is short)
  ○ Subsequent ministries and/or career
  ○ Major changes in nuclear and extended family systems during time in congregation (e.g., marriage, birth of child, divorce, death of parents), impact of changes on congregation, and congregational response.
Families in the Congregation

• Gather the following information about influential individuals in the congregation, including lay leaders (elected or not), staff members, and the most recent former clergy person.
  ○ Age, health (physical, emotional, social), profession
  ○ Nuclear family configuration (marriages, divorces, children) and information on age, health, moves, and professions, if possible.
  ○ Family of origin information:
    ▪ Number of siblings and sibling position
    ▪ Parents’ health; location
    ▪ Try to ascertain the stability, adaptiveness and intactness of family
    ▪ Emotional cutoff from family of origin
  ○ Patterns of emotional functioning in family of origin and nuclear family
  ○ Level of anxiety in past; and currently
  ○ Level of stress in the past; and currently
  ○ Any particular stressful events that are related to chronic anxiety
  ○ Number of years in the congregation
    ▪ Note if their family has a multigenerational history in the congregation
  ○ Significant recent changes in the family system, including birth, death, illness, divorce, hospitalization, affair or other marital problem, psychotherapy, child acting out or leaving home, aged parent’s needs, professional life changes, studying for or earning a new degrees, dedicated involvement in a community project
  ○ Leadership positions in the congregation
  ○ Emotional significance of the congregation, pastor, and/or leaders of the congregation to the individual and his or her family.

• Questions:
  ○ Functional position in their family of origin; functional position in the congregation
  ○ Are there sibling position issues (automatic responses and ways of functioning) that are causing difficulties between people? (E.g., middle child reacting to oldest’s assumptions that he/she knows everything?)
  ○ To what extent are the intersecting systems impacting each other – transferring anxiety?
Appendix F

SAMPLE CHARTS FOR CONGREGATIONAL ASSESSMENT

Church History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Members/Worship</th>
<th>Budget/Benevolence</th>
<th>Pastor</th>
<th>Additions</th>
<th>Deletions</th>
<th>Joys</th>
<th>Stressors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Develop a chart using this format or a similar one.
For each year of the congregation’s life (or every five years if the congregation has a long history) indicate the membership and worship attendance, budget and benevolence (you may want to include giving as well), the pastoral staff (other staff positions may be indicated as well), additions to the congregation (e.g., building program, staff expansion), deletions from the congregation (e.g., staff, important members, program), joys (e.g., anniversaries), and stressors.

(Adapted from Peter Steinke, Bridgebuilder Material.)
CONGREGATIONAL/ORGANIZATIONAL CHART

Sample

Male
Female

Congregation

Male Pastor
Female Pastor

Tension/Conflicted Relationship
Emotional Cutoff
Healthy Relationship
Fused Relationship
Appendix G

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Symptoms and/or Symptomatic Persons

**Primary Symptom**

[Blank lines for entry]

Type of symptom (physical, emotional, or social)

[Blank lines for entry]

Assess the severity of symptom. (Rate on a scale of 1 – 10, the most severe is 10)

[Blank lines for entry]

Assess the degree of functional impairment associated with the symptom. (Rate on a scale of 1 – 10, the most severe is 10)

[Blank lines for entry]

**Secondary Symptom**

[Blank lines for entry]

Type of symptom (physical, emotional, or social)

[Blank lines for entry]

Assess the severity of symptom. (Rate on a scale of 1 – 10, the most severe is 10)

[Blank lines for entry]
Assess the degree of functional impairment associated with the symptom. (Rate on a scale of 1 – 10, the most severe is 10)

__________________________________________

Assess any other symptoms in a similar manner.

If the primary symptom is conflict:
	○ Who are the primary individuals involved?
	○ What are subsequent polarized groups?
	○ What is the severity of the conflict?
	○ How long has it gone on?
	○ Describe the content, briefly.

If the primary symptom is lethargy:
	○ Describe recent attempts at change.
	○ Who was involved?
	○ What is the severity of the lethargy?
	○ How long has it gone on?
Stressors and Level of Stress

Congregational Stressors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressor (Event)</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Magnitude*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Use a scale of 1 – 5 (the most severe is 5) to indicate the magnitude of the stressor.

Identify stressors such as:

- Changes in leadership
- Illness, injury, or death of an important person
- Financial difficulties
- Building construction, destruction, or possibility for major change.
- Misconduct of a staff member or leader

Stressors in Lives of Key Leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Stressor (Event)</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Magnitude*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Use a scale of 1 – 5 (the most severe is 5) to indicate the magnitude of the stressor.
Stressors in the Community/External Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressor (Event)</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Magnitude*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Use a scale of 1 – 5 (the most severe is 5) to indicate the magnitude of the stressor.

Considering the number of stressors/events, their duration and magnitude, and the time between events, assess the level of stress for the congregation using a scale of 1 – 10, the most severe is 10.

**Overall Level of Stress:** _________________
Congregation and Family Emotional Process

In your assessment of the presenting problem and the current situation in the congregation, indicate the primary and secondary patterns of managing anxiety.

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Looking through the history of the congregation, indicate the primary and secondary patterns of managing anxiety.

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Among the key leaders, what are the primary patterns of managing anxiety?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Common patterns of managing anxiety:

- Drifting away (distancing)
- Conflict
- Overfunctioning on the part of an individual to preserve harmony
- Projection
Emotional Reactivity

The number of symptoms, plus the degree of functional impairment associated with the symptoms, the amount of distance and/or conflict in relationships, plus the apparent level of anxiety and reactivity gives a sense of the emotional reactivity of the congregation.

Distance
To what extent is the pattern of distance being used to manage anxiety? Review worship attendance, giving, and involvement in other congregational programs. You may need to go further back in the history.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>6 months previously</th>
<th>12 months previously</th>
<th>18 months previously</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Sunday School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offerings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Twitchiness**

Identify topics and issues that appear to increase anxiety and reactivity. If possible, note the event that may have instigated the reactivity. Also, rate the intensity of the reactivity on a scale of 1 – 5, 5 is the most intense.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Precipitating Event</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rate the overall level of emotional reactivity on a scale from 1 – 10: ________
Resources Beyond the Congregation

Assess the connections of the congregation to its broader context. Describe the relationships, and rate their quality on a scale of 1 – 5. In this assessment, 1 indicates a strong relationship with mutual support; 5 indicates tension to the point that there is an emotional cutoff.

Connections to the Denominational Body

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Details of Relationship</th>
<th>Quality of connection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with local judicatory (e.g., Presbytery, diocese, synod)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with national judicatory</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with other local congregations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections of professional leaders with judicatory</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Connections to the Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Details of Relationship</th>
<th>Quality of connection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community involvements: Social ministry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections with local congregations and ministries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared ministries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Connections of and within the Congregation to Former Members and Staff

Indicate the name of the former member or staff member, the number of years since they left the congregation and the circumstances under which they left. Under “Connection,” indicate “cutoff,” “healthy,” “fused,” “Cutoff” indicates a break in relationships in which tension remains. “Healthy” indicates a lack of tension, and that both the congregation and individual have moved on. “Fused” indicates interference on the part of the individual who has left in the congregation’s life, and/or continued requests on the part of congregation members for the individual to influence current congregational functioning (triangling).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Circumstance</th>
<th>Connection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Connections of Key Leaders to their Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Nuclear Family Connection</th>
<th>Extended Family Connection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Congregational Differentiation: Adaptiveness and Definition

**Step One:** Using the worksheets above, compare the “Level of Stress” with the “Level of Emotional Reactivity.”

The overall level of stress on a scale of 1 – 10

The level of emotional reactivity on a scale of 1 – 10

Locate the congregation on the chart below:
Quadrant 1: High levels of stress in combination with low levels of emotional reactivity indicate high flexibility and adaptability.

Quadrant 2: Low levels of stress in combination with low levels of emotional reactivity may or may not be indicators of the congregation’s ability to respond to challenges.

Quadrant 3: High levels of stress in combination with high levels of emotional reactivity indicate a significant crisis that the congregation may be ill-prepared to handle.

Quadrant 4: Low levels of stress combined with high levels of emotional reactivity indicate a lack of maturity and low levels of differentiation of the congregation. There is ability to adapt.

Step Two: Review the history of the congregation.
- Is there an historical pattern of difficulties that have disrupted significantly the congregation’s ability to function as the body of Christ?
- How has the congregation responded to these difficulties?

Step Three: Assess the clarity of the congregation’s self-definition on a scale of 1 – 10. A congregation in which the majority of members know why the congregation is there, and what it is about, and in which self-definition is a clear guide to its functioning would be at 10 on the scale.

Step Four: During the process of assessment, have you encountered individuals who have done less ‘blaming’ than others, and who have sought to gain a broader picture of what happened in the congregation?

Based on this information it is possible to gain an overall picture of the congregation’s level of differentiation. On a scale of 1 – 10, with 10 being the highest (and unattainable), the higher the congregation’s level of differentiation, the more likely the current crisis will be temporary and ultimately will become part of the faith community’s learning and development process.
Prognosis

A prognosis has several purposes. First, given the information gathered in the assessment, it is possible to make fairly accurate predictions of outcomes. Second, it suggests strategies for pastoral care and leadership of congregations.

Prediction of Outcomes:
In light of information gathered and assessed in the categories above, consider the following questions:

- Is the presenting problem something that can be resolved, or is it chronic?
- Do you think that lowering anxiety levels will relieve the problem?
- Do you think the problem will reappear as a different symptom when anxiety increases again?
- How intense is the expectation of a “quick fix”?

Differentiation, the Primary Variable
To what extent are current leaders of the congregation able to think more objectively about the intense emotional processes present in the congregation, and ways in which they have contributed? To what extent are current leaders willing to work on their own functioning and differentiation? Are there others in the congregation who will take a leadership role?
Appendix H

THE EMERGING/EMERGENT CHURCH

Over the past decade, the word *emergence* has become a bit of a buzz-word within the society and the Christian church. Although use of the term in this work is not directly related to the phenomenon identified as the “emerging church” or “emergent church”, for the sake of clarity in this work a short overview is offered of this contemporary movement.

Gaining a sense of exactly what is meant by the use of the terms *emerging* and *emergent* in relationship to the church is challenging. Kester Brewin argues that there are important distinctions between use of the term “Emergent Church” and *emerging church*. He writes,

The *emerging church* is a label that is being stuck on anything outside the ‘norms’ of the church as most people know it; whereas the *Emergent Church* is specifically about the principles of the science of emergence to church growth.\(^1\)

While Brewin is intentional about connecting the Emergent Church to principles of science, in particular the idea of growth from the bottom-up, this is by no means a standard definition. In a volume entitled *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* (2007) written by leaders of the “Emergent Village,” Mark Scandrette describes what “we mean by

emerge—as the primal humility, vulnerability, and passion of a search for a way with God together in the world we live in.”

Marcus Borg suggests that there is “an emerging Christian way,” a vision of a new kind of Christian that “exists side by side with an earlier form of being Christian.” The contrast is so great that he sometimes speaks of the church in North America as “a tale of two Christianities,” with two competing paradigms. The earlier paradigm is “belief-centered,” with a focus on the uniqueness of Christianity, salvation as afterlife, scripture as authoritative, and faith as believing. The newer, emerging paradigm is “transformation-centered.” “In a sentence,” Borg writes, “it sees the Christian life as a relationship with God as known in Jesus that changes us, that transforms us.”

In a critical response to the emerging church, DeYoung and Kluck review a myriad of interpretations of the phenomenon, ranging from “nothing more than a new style and approach to worship that includes coffee, couches and candles,” to an “appreciation for postmodernism” to “a return to a more ancient, primitive, and pristine form of Christianity,” to a protest movement against traditional evangelicalism,

---


modernism, and/or seeker-sensitive megachurches, to “experiential, participator, image
driven, and connected.”

In a more positive yet still exploratory vein, Nathan Frambach asks if the seeming
“need to use some variation of the word emerge, generally emerging or emergent,” is
“merely the newest (at least for the time being), most interesting, and lucrative
ecclesiastical fad,” or is “all of this emerging theo-babble something more, something
deeper?” Are there, he asks, “emerging ways of understanding and being the church that
are lurking in the wings, on the ground, taken a hold, and changing the religious
landscape?” Frambach is hopeful that there is something more. As he describes it, “the
emerging church is cultivating communities of faithful innovation that are seeking to
navigate the postmodern cultural landscape loosely tethered to God’s story.” In their
journey, they both ask and seek to live an operative question: “What does it mean to be
who we are where we are?”

One of the criticisms of the emerging church movement has been the lack of
theological definition. A newly published volume by Philip Clayton—theologian,
philosopher, and significant contributor to the religion and science debate as well as to
understandings of emergence articulated earlier in this section—suggests an interest on
the part of academic theologians in the emerging church. There is a reversal at work

4 Kevin DeYoung, Ted Kluck, and David F. Wells, "Why We're Not Emergent (by Two Guys Who
Should Be)." (Moody Publishers, 2008).

5 Nathan C. P. Frambach, "Emerging Ministry: Being Church Today " In Lutheran voices.
(Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007).
here, however. In response to the challenge to academic theology presented by Brian McLaren (a primary voice in the emerging church) and process theologian John Cobb, Clayton and other theologians involved in a project funded by the Ford Foundation “want to break the monopoly academic theologians have had on theology and to return serious Christian reflection to all who are drawn to walk the Way of Jesus.” There are, he argues, “urgent Christian reasons to give theology back to the churches and to ordinary people—even if the word theology has to be radically transformed in the process.”

The work of church historian Phyllis Tickle also must be noted in this context. As you may recall, Tickle posits that the church is in the midst of a “rummage sale” that seems to come around every 500 years. During these times of upheaval, “the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at that time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.” The “great emergence” is the term Tickle uses to describe this new season. Tickle’s project is broad, moving through history to identify other religious upheavals in and from which the church renewed itself, as well as offering an in depth review of the myriad of contributory changes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Although Tickle does not write directly of the emergent church, or the emerging church movement, her

---

6 Clayton, *Transforming Christian Theology: For Church and Society*, 2, 6. This volume grows out of the “Transforming Theology” movement.

work definitely offers a context for it. In addition, this volume is published as one of the “Emergent Village resources for communities of faith.”