Clergy Family Systems Training and How It Changes Clergy Leadership Attitudes and Practices

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ABSTRACT

CLERGY FAMILY SYSTEMS TRAINING AND
HOW IT CHANGES CLERGY LEADERSHIP
ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES

by

Michael J. Aufderhar

Chair: Shirley A. Freed
Title: CLERGY FAMILY SYSTEMS TRAINING AND HOW IT CHANGES CLERGY LEADERSHIP ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES

Problem

Clergy persons without an awareness of their family system patterns and reactivity often exercise their leadership in unhealthy ways that are damaging to their congregations. This study described changes in leadership attitudes and practices experienced by clergy participants in a Family Systems training program conducted by Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

Method

This qualitative case study followed a narrative design. I collected data while participating in the program and 3 years later conducted semi-structured person-to-person interviews with all participants who were willing and available. The data also include
drawings by each participant depicting their experience before and after the intervention. The constant comparative method was used to code data into emergent themes. Internal validity was enhanced by using triangulation, member checks, clarifying researcher bias, rich/thick description, and including discrepant information. Composite narratives were created as alternative representations to represent the themes from the data while protecting the identity of the participants. Images of the changes experienced in clergy leadership attitudes and practices can be formed by the reader and provide the ability to assess whether the results of this analysis fit a particular situation, thus providing external validity.

Results

The clergy persons in this study experienced eight different positive changes in their leadership attitudes and practices through learning and applying Clergy Family Systems Theory. They found the concepts in the training program to be highly relevant to their personal and professional lives and expressed a very high Overall Value of the experience. After the program they found they were more aware of systems issues in real settings and also more aware of their own reactive patterns. These awarenesses contributed to their being Less Reactive, Less Anxious, Less Entangled, Less Taking Things Personally, Less Blaming, More Understanding, More Calm, and More Calming.

Conclusions

This study has shown that clergypersons participating in a continuing education program on Family Systems Theory applied to clergy and congregations found dramatic improvements in their leadership attitudes and practices in their congregations. They
believe that this training has provided the “most valuable tool” in their “ministry toolboxes.” This study shows that clergy and their families, church leaders at all levels, and those responsible for educating and training clergy should pursue similar programs to strengthen the relational health and mission effectiveness of Christian churches.
Andrews University

School of Education

CLERGY FAMILY SYSTEMS TRAINING AND
HOW IT CHANGES CLERGY LEADERSHIP
ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by

Michael J. Aufderhar

March 2010
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APPROVAL BY THE COMMITTEE:

Chair: Shirley A. Freed
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Member: Ron Flowers

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Date approved
To my children, Serena and Chad,
who grew up with this,
and to my wife, Brenda Aufderhar
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helping the Church become healthier and by building up the body of Christ “until we all
reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature,
attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13).
CHAPTER ONE

I'M SO GLAD I’M A PART OF THE FAMILY OF GOD

Background of the Problem

“I’m so glad I’m a part of the Family of God . . .” My mind drifted as I listened to the familiar tune being sung by the faithful members of our congregation. I was vaguely aware of the smiles of those within view of my half-glazed-over eyes, and the hearty singing seemed almost to defy any possible doubting of the truth behind the poetic words. My lips moved in synchrony with the others as my mind wandered off the path. “. . . you will notice we say ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ ‘round here . . .” Just then I saw before me in instant replay from two nights before the angry face of “sister” Morris, our head deaconess, as she spat out the words, “And if you do . . . I’ll have my name taken off the books!” Her husband, “brother” Morris, head deacon, had glared around the room at each elder. His face as red as a stop sign, he had just let out an emphatic “Humph!” before leaving the meeting. “It’s because we’re a family and these folks are so dear . . .”

I thought about the number of people in our congregation of just under 200 who had gotten upset and seemed to be spinning off wildly in one direction or another since the adultery and three-way spouse swap had been discovered. Everything seemed out of balance. Some were fearful. Others were angry. Some seemed sullen, and others just shook their heads piously and clucked their tongues. Just a few seemed honestly distraught in trying to figure out how to help me, their pastor, deal with the deteriorating
situation. “... when one has a heartache, we all share the tears ...” Well, that part seemed sort of true, but it was not much comfort.

Having five of the spouses who were spending their nights in the wrong bedrooms, three mothers and one father of different ones of these spouses, a brother of one, and a few other miscellaneous relatives all under one church roof made for quite a challenging picture. As the piano and the organ played on, even the warm sunlight spilling through the high sanctuary windows down onto the clean carpet, padded pews, and lovely floral arrangement on the platform where I stood could not quite convince me of the words I heard myself singing along with next: “... and rejoice in each victory in this family so dear.”

Of course I love the thought, and honestly believe in the concept, of “the Family of God.” The Bible not only specifically refers to the New Testament believers as “the family of God” (1 Pet 4:17, NIV), but also uses other metaphors and descriptions to indicate that there should be close harmony and functional interdependent relationships between believers. The Apostle Paul seemed to like the analogy of a human body composed of many parts working together and said to the Corinthian believers, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Cor 12:27, emphasis supplied). He also understood that this body of Christ would not experience perfect health and harmony all the time. He recognized that Christians would at times be “tossed back and forth,” having to deal with “the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Eph 4:14). Yet he still upheld the more satisfying picture of this metaphor:

15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Eph 4:15-16)
Why is this *positive* picture not seen more often in Christian churches? Why do so many church families seem to be *dys*-functioning? Sadly, in over 20 years of ministry, the “family of God” situation described above is not the only example of stress, anxiety, hurt, and deep anguish I have personally witnessed in the “body of Christ.” Complex, emotionally wrenching relational disasters continue to plague the “family” of God, confounding pastors and other church leaders who try to untangle them and bring healing to the injured. Unfortunately, my experience is not unique.

Church consultant Anthony Robinson (2004), traveling around the country visiting congregations in need of assistance, says he finds that many are “caught in vicious cycles” and that there is a “chilly climate of anxiety, which these days seems to be more common than the common cold” (p. 8). An empirical investigation of the psychological difficulties experienced by Christian leaders found “stress” and “frustration” among their most pressing experiences (Ellison & Mattila, 1983). Using the keywords *church* and *conflict* to search the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) database of journal articles and books reveals a frightening list of over 2,000 references with titles like “Conflict in the Church” (Herman, 1984), *When a Congregation Is Betrayed* (Gaede, 2006), “Piecing Together a Shattered Church” (Porter, 1988), *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership* (McIntosh & Rima, 1997), and many more (Cowdell, 2008; Minnich-Sadler, 2003; Phillips, 1992; Wellman, 2001). The *dys*-function of congregations and their clergy leaders is not a small problem to the Christian Church. No wonder leaders are asking how health can be restored to hurting churches finding themselves in a state of dis-ease.
Fortunately, in the last half of the 20th century Family Systems Theory developed as a new approach for understanding and treating complex family issues and has more recently been applied to the “family of God” (Burge, 2002; Friedman, 1985; O’Halloran, 1981; R. W. Richardson, 1996; Steinke, 1993, 1996; Tran, 1995). Since Family Systems Theory has proved helpful in families, church leaders should not be surprised that it can be helpful in congregational families. As Friedman (1985) points out,

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. (p. 1)

Friedman solidly established the reality that congregations are subject to the same family system dynamics that human biological families experience. He showed that clergy persons, knowingly or not, are constantly participating in the system dynamics of these three interlocking families—the congregation as a family, the families of the congregation, and the clergy’s own family. His or her own family, of course, is not just the family under his or her roof, but the entire extended family including families of origin.

Largely because of Friedman’s (1985) application of Bowen’s (1978) theories to the church environment, much more study has been given to the impact of the clergyperson’s own family system on his or her leadership in the congregation (Beebe, 2004; Even, 2002; Harbert, 2001; O’Halloran, 1981; Pleva, 2003; R. W. Richardson, 1996, 2005; Robertson, 1982; Rodriguez, 2000; Rugenstein, 2004; Steinke, 1993, 1996; Tran, 1995; Zimmerman, 2002).
Statement of the Problem

My pastoral experience, supported by a review of the literature, has led to the formulation of this problem statement: Clergy persons without an awareness of their Family Systems patterns and reactivity often exercise their leadership in unhealthy ways that are damaging to their congregations.

Seminaries and other religious organizations have been conducting programs to educate clergy persons on how Family Systems Theory applies to clergy and congregations for more than twenty years. However, no formal studies have been found that evaluate, assess, or describe the outcomes of these programs in the lives and leadership of the clergy who have participated.

Purpose of the Study

A number of different Clergy Family Systems programs are offered with the intention of improving the overall health and function of congregations by helping clergy persons understand these systems dynamics and apply the principles in their own families and congregations. Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (LPTS) conducted such a program with two phases, extending from 1999 to 2003, having what appear to be positive outcomes. The purpose of this study was to narratively describe the actual impact of this program on the clergy who participated.

Research Question

The primary research question was: In what ways have clergy persons who understood and personally applied concepts learned in Clergy Family Systems training programs experienced changes in their leadership attitudes and practices?
Research Design

I pursued the answer to this research question through a qualitative case study in which I was the primary research instrument. According to Merriam, “the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case” (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). The “case” I defined for this current study was the voluntary self-study program for clergy that was held at the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (LPTS) in 1999-2000 and 2002-2003 in which the family systems theories of Bowen as applied by Friedman, Steinke, Richardson, and others were studied and applied. The case is specifically limited to those clergypersons who attended both the basic and the advanced series.

When I first learned about the seminar programs at LPTS I realized it was a great opportunity for me to become a “participant-observer” and prepare to do some kind of qualitative study. Having grown up as a preacher’s kid and then worked as a pastor myself for over 20 years, I was very interested in the topic of Church relationships and overall health. So I joined the program and planned at some point in the future to make a more complete study not just of the topic, but of the learning process as well. Early in the process I realized that the pressing question for me was “What difference is this going to make in the long run?” This later became the basis of my research question for this study.

Three years after the program was over I was able to find and interview 14 of the 17 participants who had taken both courses and find out what results they were finding in their lives after 2 separate years of training and 3 more years to apply it. My main source of data became the in-depth, semi-structured, person-to-person interviews I conducted
with the clergy I had participated with in the LPTS program. The clergy were male and female and from many different denominations.

Besides the open-ended questions I asked, I also asked for experiences or stories that would describe some of the changes in leadership attitudes and practices that the clergy experienced. I also asked each one to draw some kind of a picture or diagram of how their life was before the program and how it was after.

I had all the interviews transcribed and then started a constant comparative method of coding the data to find the recurring themes. Once the themes were beginning to come clear I began constructing some composite narratives to depict the themes in a way that would accomplish two separate goals: a) to help protect the identities of my subjects so that their stories could be heard without exposing their personal lives, and b) to provide rich, thick descriptions that would generate images, skills, and ideas (Eisner, 1998) that would allow the reader to generalize or transfer those images, skills, and ideas into other contexts.

This type of research design was used because like other researchers, I wanted to “study situations and objects intact” (Eisner, 1998, p. 33) and because I was more “interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing” (Merriam, 1998, p. 28).

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used in this study comes from two primary sources. The first is Murray Bowen’s (1978) work on Family Systems Theory, which gives the overall foundations of how human beings behave in emotional systems such as families, work environments, and social or religious groupings. The second is Edwin Friedman’s
(1985) landmark work, which makes some adjustments and adds additional constructs and propositions to extend Family Systems Theory to better describe the unique system dynamics of clergy, their families, and their congregations.

**Delimitations**

This study was delimited to only the clergy who had completed both years of the training. While many more had completed only the first year, I chose to gather my data only from those who chose to come back and take the second-year experience as well. It is also restricted to the particular cohort who started the program at LPTS in the fall of 1999.

**Limitations**

Potential limitations of this study include the fact that the data collected are primarily self-reported and depend on participant truthfulness. The accuracy with which they can describe their own behaviors and attitudes is another possible limitation. No members from the congregations of these study program participants were interviewed, nor were family members interviewed.

**Assumptions**

The primary assumptions in this study are: a) that it is a positive and helpful process for clergy persons to become more self-aware—especially of their relationship patterns, and b) that this awareness will help to create positive change in their leadership.

**Significance of the Study**

Murray Bowen’s (1978) development of Family Systems Theory opened up a whole new way of thinking about the relationship health of families. His theory
described how individuals tend to develop various emotionally reactive patterns that interlock into systems of dysfunction in the family. He also described how individuals pass these patterns down through the generations as well as carry them on to other emotional systems in which they are involved—such as friendships and work associations, for example.

Edwin H. Friedman (1985) then drew attention to how Bowen’s insights into family dynamics could also aid in understanding more fully the complex relationships within congregations—the “Family of God.” Others (R. W. Richardson, 1987, 1996, 2005; Steinke, 1993, 1996) have confirmed and extended Friedman’s work to make it more practical to apply to improving the relationship health of clergy families and congregations. Seminaries and other religious organizations have begun conducting training and coaching programs to help educate clergy on these topics.

While much excellent work has gone into describing and confirming the way these systems function and into developing strategies to help improve the function of the systems at work in the body of Christ, this current study goes a step further by revealing the actual results in the lives of clergy who have been willing to put in the time to study and personally apply the concepts in their own families and congregations.

This study adds to the scholarly research in the field of congregational systems by using appropriate research methodology to specifically describe some of the actual outcomes of the LPTS program for clergy described here. By carefully and creatively describing these outcomes, this study aims to help increase the number of clergy pursuing this type of personal and professional growth opportunity. This study increases awareness not only of the theory, but also of the potential for improvement in leadership
attitudes and practices. The results of this study can be used by organizations that are doing training in this area by giving them concrete information from the lived experiences of the clergy who have gone through such a program. This study also has the potential for improving policy and practice in religious organizations to give greater priority to assisting clergy in getting education and intervention in dealing with systems issues in their families and congregations.

**Definitions of Terms**

*Emotional system* is a core concept of Bowen Theory. It is a group of individuals who, by spending a significant amount of time together, are involved in meaningful relationships. This could be any group—a nuclear family, a work group, a military unit, a congregation, or a group of golfing buddies. A primary characteristic of an emotional system is that “emotions or feelings circuit from individual to individual by means of patterned emotional reactions—distance, conflict, overfunctioning/underfunctioning—or triangling” (Gilbert, 1998, p. 182).

*Anxiety* usually refers to a response of an organism to a threat—real or imagined. Sometimes it is described as “heightened reactivity” or “emotional intensity.” Anxiety can be chronic—a certain level being passed down from generation to generation—or acute, as stimulated by some precipitating event. In Bowenian terms, the various “flavors” of anxiety (fear, anger, depression, hatred, and even excessive elation) are not very important. Whatever the “flavor” is, it still gets passed around according to the same patterns and has similar implications for the functioning of the emotional system. Anxiety shows up in quantitative changes in the body and is also revealed in thought and behavior expressions and patterns (see *Relationship patterns* below).
**Fusion** is the emotional attachment of two or more individuals (or selves) in which the togetherness overpowers the separateness of the individuals and they have very little ability to act independently of the others. There are degrees of fusion, but the more fused two or more individuals are, the more all of their actions are simply re-actions to someone else in the emotional system.

**Self-differentiation** is a term that describes the real goal of Bowen family-of-origin work. The term “differentiation” is borrowed from the science of embryology. “In the developing fetus, groups of cells that are identical in the beginning become different from each other. They ‘differentiate’ in order to form the different organs of the body” (Gilbert, 1998, p. 181). Similarly, this term is used in Bowen Theory to describe the emotional maturing process people go through that helps them to find and stand up for their uniqueness and individuality. The more a person is able to stand for themselves, even in environments of strong emotional pressure, the more self-differentiated Bowen would say they are. Most importantly, the more differentiated a person is, “the more choice they have at any given time regarding whether to operate out of emotions or intellect” (Gilbert, 1998, p. 181).

**Relationship patterns** are specific ways that emotional reactivity (anxiety) is passed or spread from one individual to another in an emotional system. Most individuals find what seems to “work” and then tend to use the same pattern over and over again. After years of working with families with all different kinds of issues, Bowen identified five well-defined relationship patterns: conflict, distance, cutoff, overfunctioning/underfunctioning, and triangling.
**Triangling.** In Bowen’s view two-person systems are inherently unstable and human beings tend to seek stability in relationship triangles (three individuals emotionally related to each other). Triangling occurs when one member of a stressed two-person system attempts (by various means) to draw a third into the emotional relationship to help contain the anxiety—or diffuse it from the first two. Much of Bowen counseling or coaching practice deals with strategies for recognizing and dealing with this difficult situation of being triangled in.

*Overfunctioning/underfunctioning reciprocity* is a relationship pattern that Bowen (1978) first identified in husband-wife relationships (p. 378). It happens when the fusion, or lack of self-differentiation, causes one spouse (or friend, or work associate) to unduly adapt themselves to the other—depending on the other to think, choose, or act for them. This may come from a fear of the emotional reaction (anger, teasing, belittling, etc.) of the other if they do not agree, or it may arise simply from a lack of confidence in themselves and their own ability to choose. The other spouse (or friend, or work associate) responds by going ahead and taking the role—perhaps feeling better about him- or herself for “helping” the other or for being the “strong one.” When this shifting of responsibility—or as Bowen would say, giving up to, or taking from, the self of the other—seems successful or to some degree satisfying to both individuals, then a pattern develops and takes root. Unfortunately, this is a pattern that, like a teeter-totter out of balance, tends to get further and further out of balance as time goes on.

*Genograms* are a specialized kind of a drawing of a family tree for the purposes of depicting the concepts of Family Systems Theory as they exist in a specific family system. It uses simple symbols to depict the basic family structure plus special symbols
to indicate the kinds of emotional connections and relationships between different people in the family. Many authors (Gilbert, 1998, 2006; Herrington, Creech, & Taylor, 2003; R. W. Richardson, 1987, 1996, 2005; Steinke, 1993) writing from a Bowen Theory framework give a description of these symbols and how to use them to improve one’s understanding of the system being considered. There is also software specifically designed to aid in the making of complex genograms.

**Organization of the Study**

This study is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the problem and describes the purpose of the study, including the single research question. I explain the research design, theoretical framework, and significance of the study. Definitions of terms help to clarify meanings of words and concepts that are distinct to Family Systems Theory and this study.

Chapter 2 starts with a historical context for the development of the theoretical framework and then describes the literature in terms of a “family tree.”

The methodology used in this study is explained in chapter 3, which includes the context of the study, myself as the research instrument, sampling considerations, and what kinds of data were collected. It also addresses trustworthiness, generalizability, and the use of composite narratives in presenting the results.

Alternative representations are used in chapter 4 to give the reader a rich image of the real findings of this study. There is a Prayer Journal and two stories of different clergy people. Each shows different aspects of how their lives and leadership were changed through their application of Family Systems Theory. At the beginning of the
chapter there is a brief description of themes to watch for, and then a review of themes follows each story.

Chapter 5 gives a full description of each theme in the findings of the study. They are discussed in a progression from *Understanding and Relevance*, and *Overall Value*, to *Awarenesses* and *Attitudes and Practices* that changed in the participants’ lives and leadership. The chapter concludes with an acknowledgment of some disconfirming data and a conclusion.

Chapter 6 returns to the problem, purpose, and research question. It summarizes the study and discusses the results. Recommendations arising from the study are given for five different groups of people who can benefit from the findings of this study.
CHAPTER TWO

FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY GOES TO CHURCH

Introduction

Since Murray Bowen’s (1966) Family Systems Theory is the foundational theoretical framework for this study, the literature relevant to this study can best be understood against a brief backdrop of the historical context in which his theory emerged. This chapter then describes Bowen’s theory along with other major family systems theorists. It also reviews a second generation of systems theorists and describes the literature of those who took the application of Family Systems Theory to clergy and congregational families. Finally, studies applying and testing these theories are reviewed, concluding with an analysis and the reason for the need of this current study.

Historical Context

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the entire history of psychotherapy and counseling; however, even a brief historical context to aid in understanding the themes that are alive and well in the field today must begin with Sigmund Freud. His contribution to the current practices of psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, and counseling is huge. “Because psychoanalysis was the most influential theory of therapy during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, virtually every major theorist . . . was originally trained in Freudian psychoanalysis” (Sharf, 2008, p. 25). While some totally rejected his ideas and many others developed their own theories built, in part, on his, Freud’s theory of
psychoanalysis is still the reference point to which everything else has been compared for more than 100 years (p. 25). This is not to imply that there has been no controversy or disagreement over his theories or the many variations and mutations of the theories, and the field has evolved considerably since his death in 1939. However, the impact of his work should not be underestimated.

With such a dominant player in the stream of thought during these years, one might reasonably ask what basic assumptions he may have made that everyone else bought into without much consideration. Of course we are looking at it with the proverbial “20-20 hindsight” of over 100 years, but from that vantage point consider the following. One aspect of Freud’s thinking seemed so basic to anything psychological that no one seemed to have really thoughtfully questioned it until the 1940s and 1950s. While Freud is well known for his emphasis on inborn drives, unconscious processes, and his structure of the personality (ego, id, superego), one of his earliest publications (originally published in German together with Josef Breuer), *Studies on Hysteria* (Breuer & Freud, 1895), hypothesized that symptoms of hysteria resulted from very painful memories combined with unexpressed emotions. This led them to propose that the therapeutic task was recollecting forgotten events and encouraging the expression of emotions. This sounds simple enough. But even here the assumption is so basic that it is not evident without spelling it out; the assumption is that whatever went into the individual’s current condition, the solution must be in individually working with that person to deal with their memories and emotions. Again, it is possible to read that sentence and still not understand what is “wrong” with it, because it seems to logically follow. However, Family Systems advocates today would immediately see that as very
narrow thinking, because that individual is just one small part of a larger “system.” It would be analogous to an auto mechanic sitting with a spark plug from an old internal combustion engine that will not run right, trying to figure out why the spark plug will not spark without considering the spark plug wire, the distributor cap, the rotor, the points, the condenser, or any other part of the ignition system all the way back to the key in the ignition switch. True, even in this analogy some good might be able to be done with the spark plug by itself. It could be cleaned and the gap could be measured and re-set to an appropriate tolerance, but without addressing the spark plug in combination with the system of which it is a part, a solution may never be reached.

So what brought this assumption out in the open? With a nod to the Lorenz’s “butterfly effect,” which tells us that the flap of a butterfly wing in Tokyo can effect a tornado in Texas (Wheatley, 2000, p. 121), let me acknowledge that there were probably many “causes,” or at least partial causes, of which I am unaware. However, the literature suggests at least two events that helped to set the stage for Murray Bowen to propose a theory considering people as parts of a system rather than as isolated individuals when addressing their psychological needs.

The first event was when B. F. Skinner (1938), in a world where psychotherapy was practically synonymous with Freudian Psychoanalysis, began to publicize his unorthodox ideas that “behavior patterns were fixed by the reinforcements that occurred after the behavior, rather than elicited by what was in a person’s head before” (Friedman, 1985, p. 13). While this may seem somewhat unrelated to the concepts of systems theory, it was one of the first “flaps of a butterfly wing” that helped theorists to back up a little further in their assumptions and reconsider everything. Friedman (1985) saw
Skinner’s willingness to risk being labeled a heretic (which he was) when he started challenging long-standing assumptions and publishing what today we would call “out of the box” thinking as one of the factors that paved the way for others to think more broadly and explore wider options for how to view the human experience. Thus, this was the first of two revolutions that made way for the birth of what we now know as family systems therapy.

The second event, or revolution, came from outside the social sciences, and it did not come from any one person. It came through a change in the way we think about the world around us, which was brought on simply by the speed with which information began to multiply at this time in history. As human beings were overwhelmed not only by the sheer volume of new information, but also by the corresponding complexity, the old ways of making sense out of information became inadequate. Friedman (1985) explains,

Systems thinking began in response to this dimension of the information problem. It deals with data in a new way. It focuses less on content and more on the process that governs the data; less on the cause-and-effect connections that link bits of information and more on the principles of organization that give data meaning. (p. 15)

Friedman is not talking about “Family Systems Thinking” here just yet. He is referring to what became known as “General Systems Theory.” People like Norbert Wiener (1948), a mathematician who was a significant player in the early development of computers, wrote of feedback mechanisms that were essential in the processing of information. He was learning lessons from the animal kingdom and applying them to our new world full of machines. Others, like von Bertalanffy (1969), were exploring the interrelationships of parts to each other and to the whole system in the areas of biology and medicine. Information was expanding rapidly in these studies, in part, because of
advances in our ability to see smaller things. The development in 1903 by Richard Zsigmondy of the ultramicroscope allowed scientists for the first time to study objects below the size of the wavelength of light (Bellis, 2009), and in 1931 Ernst Ruska co-invented the electron microscope, which made it possible to view objects as small as the diameter of an atom. As one considers the degree of “zooming in” that this allowed, one can imagine the astronomical increase in the quantity of data scientists had to process. So this idea of feedback mechanisms and general systems theory led people to begin to understand the difference between *linear causality*, *multiple causality*, and *circularity*, or *systems thinking*. *Linear causality* is much like a series of billiard balls colliding with each other, one after the other, in which A causes B, B causes C, C causes D, and D causes E (Figure 1). Even with *multiple causation*, in which the combination of A, B, C, and D together cause E, this is still considered linear thinking (Figure 2). When the door is opened to causes going both ways and any object in the system having at least partial causal effect on any other part of the system you then have a *circularity* or *system thinking* (Figure 3).

While all of this may seem rather elementary to our thinking today, it was a new thought to take this concept into the analysis of people and their psychological well-being. It was in this historical context that Murray Bowen, working with children with schizophrenia and their families at the Menninger Clinic, began to develop Family Systems Theory.

![Figure 1. Linear causation.](image)
After surveying the historical context from which Family Systems Theory grew, and reviewing the differences between linear causality, multiple causality, and circularity, it would be fruitless to attempt to convince the reader that there is a neat linear development from Murray Bowen through the literature of all those who have contributed to the topic down to today. In fact, the degree to which different theorists and practitioners impacted the thinking and practice of their colleagues, apprentices, and even later readers of their publications would be impossible to determine. However, to help make some sense of the literature and the various terms that sound so similar in this field,
I have expanded on a “Family Systems Theory Genogram” first obtained from Dr. Emlyn Ott (2009) in a Healthy Congregations Training at Trinity Lutheran Seminary. I have called this one simply a “Family Systems Theory Family Tree” since I have not used the specific symbols of a genogram or added any of the more detailed depictions of relationships dynamics as a true genogram would. This chart (Figure 4) is specifically focused on the “lineage” of theory that focused on the applications of Family Systems Theory to clergy, their families, and their congregations.

I have divided the chart into three “generations” simply to make it easier to describe the different parts. The first generation includes the major theorists of Family Systems Theory. The second generation in this chart includes those who “descended” from Bowen in that they worked with him, studied under him, or at least followed his theory quite closely and built upon it each in their own ways. I show only the “descendants” of Bowen in this chart because the case being studied here used Bowen’s theory as its major theoretical framework and made very little reference to the other major theorists in the first generation. The third generation includes only the major players in the application of Family Systems Theory to clergy and congregations—Friedman’s “descendents.” The gray shading is simply showing that there is a closeness in the work of Friedman and those in the third generation in terms of congregational applications. Most of the training and coaching for clergy, which is the focus of this current study, comes from the resources of the people and organizations in the gray shaded area.
Figure 4. A Family Systems Theory Literature “Family Tree.”
Other literature reviewed in this chapter includes studies that test or make application of the theories in these first three generations of the Family Systems Theory Family Tree. This grouping of literature is not referred to as the fourth generation of the family tree, however, because the lines of lineage are much less clear and the studies are not really making advances to the theory as much as they are applying or testing the theories.

Naturally, like any family tree, there are many other ways that branches could be drawn showing other “descendents” of the main “patriarchs” or “matriarchs” of this family tree. Those are outside of the scope of this study. It is also true that more diagramming of influences from “previous generations” could be done. However, it would get much more complicated than any family tree because each “child” does not have just one “biological father” and one “biological mother.” As Figure 3 implies, there could be multiple and bi-directional causes in this chart that are also far beyond the scope of this present study.

If this were actually a genogram, another level of complexity would have to be added to the chart. A genogram would include various symbols showing relationship dynamics between the different “family members.” There might be lines showing extreme closeness or fusion. Other jagged lines would show conflict or at least difference of opinion. Some lines would be dashed or broken showing distance or even complete cutoff. Many of these features could be relevant to this drawing as well, but the increased complexity would make readability almost impossible. Where there are any significant differences or conflicts I will refer to them in the text, but they are not depicted in the drawing.
Now to pursue the literature further, the next sections proceed generation by generation through the “Family Systems Theory Family Tree.”

First-Generation Family Systems Theorists

While some give Nathan Ackerman credit as the “initiator of family therapy and work with families as a unit” (Sharf, 2008, p. 480), it was also acknowledged that his writings “do not provide a clear, systematic approach for therapists who wish to follow his method” (p. 480). Perhaps this is why his name is little known and he is usually not listed as one of the major theorists. Murray Bowen is the one who is most commonly recognized for launching the field of Family Systems Theory.

Murray Bowen, M.D.

Reviewing Bowen’s extensive writings (Bowen, 1966, 1978; Bowen & Sagar, 1997; M. E. Kerr & Bowen, 1988, 2003) and videos explains why Family Systems Theory is widely known as “Bowen Theory.” Bowen’s video collection itself is quite astounding. The collection began in 1968 when Bowen was Chairman of the Division of Social Psychiatry at the Medical College of Virginia. Dr. Bowen was one of the earliest psychiatrists to use video as both a teaching method and as a way to document family changes.

A monthly series of multiple family videotapes was produced with two families from 1968 until 1983. These two families stayed in the project for 15 years. Segments from these videotapes continue to be used to illustrate the concepts in Bowen Family Systems Theory. Dr. Bowen continued to produce teaching tapes until his death in 1990. This collection, noting both family emotional process and the theoretical thinking of the therapist, spans the largest number of years of any collection of its kind. Two hundred
hours of videotapes, covering 15 years, were accepted for preservation in 1986 by the National Institute of Health (Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, 2009a).

Bowen not only recorded hours of video showing and describing his work, and wrote clearly and prolifically, but he was also very open to having students around listening and learning from his work. He seemed to enjoy having conferences, explaining his work, and welcoming questions about his work. His open attitude is probably best seen in a statement he makes in the epilogue of a book he co-authored with Dr. Michael Kerr. Bowen says,

Dr. Kerr has written a major portion of the book, without my knowledge of its content. This has been purposeful. He has worked in the Georgetown family programs for almost 20 years. He probably knows more about my theoretical, therapeutic, and organizational orientation than any other person. (M. E. Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 339)

So what is Bowen’s theory? The best short summary of his theory is actually found on the Bowen Center’s current website. It says this:

Bowen family systems theory is a theory of human behavior that views the family as an emotional unit and uses systems thinking to describe the complex interactions in the unit. It is the nature of a family that its members are intensely connected emotionally. . . . The connectedness and reactivity make the functioning of family members interdependent. A change in one person's functioning is predictably followed by reciprocal changes in the functioning of others. (Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, 2009c, para. 2)

Bowen describes his theory in eight interlocking concepts. In reading his material and reading many others trying to summarize his material, I find many more concepts than these eight. Others do too, as one can see in the section on Edwin H. Friedman. However, these provide a good starting point to see the kinds of issues that his theory addresses (Bowen, 1978). The eight concepts are (a) differentiation of self (the most important concept), (b) nuclear family emotional system, (c) triangles, (d) family
projection process, (e) multigenerational transmission process, (f) emotional cutoff, (g) sibling position, and (h) societal emotional process.

Some of these have already been described at length in the definition of terms in chapter 1. Others will be described in greater detail when they are relevant in chapter 5.

When reviewing Bowen’s work, one characteristic that I believe made his theory even more popular is the way he made his work very practical. He never spent much time theorizing without it being closely connected to the actual clinical work he did regularly. In fact, Bowen (M. E. Kerr & Bowen, 1988) plainly states, “The theory is too intertwined with therapy to separate the two” (p. 339).

His actual therapy technique in the clinic began with an evaluation period preceding a therapeutic intervention. In taking the family history, he would normally draw up a genogram to help him depict the various system dynamics as they showed themselves in the sessions. He would also use these genograms to explain to the family what he was observing. Then, as patterns would arise in the sessions, he would calmly explain what he was observing, drawing attention to how the current process may relate to a process that had previously been identified in an earlier generation of the family. He would then suggest ways that a person in an emotionally laden relationship triangle could take steps to detriangulate (Sharf, 2008, p. 487). Because of Bowen’s emphasis on the extended family, and to distinguish Bowen’s work from other theorists who developed systems theories, Bowen’s is sometimes described as “Intergenerational Family Systems Theory” (p. 483). Both researchers and practitioners continue to be interested in this intergenerational theory.
A quick search of various scholarly databases and journals will find Bowen’s name and theories scattered throughout. It is quite amazing to see how many different sub-specialities have developed. Many pages of descriptions of the incredibly wide range of sub-topics to which Bowen Theory is being applied and tested could be included here. However, for this study, I will just cite a couple of studies that confirm the validity of this theory in some of the areas most relevant to the research question of this study and, for balance, to also show that not all parts of his theory have proven true at the hand of the researchers.

First, here is the disconfirming research. Bowen Theory says that when a person marries “he will, like his parents and his parents’ parents, select a mate who has the same level of differentiation” (M. E. Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 227). While this is not a major component of overall Bowen Theory, it is something he states quite strongly, and he does use it as a foundational assumption upon which he builds some other parts of his theory. However, Miller, Anderson, and Keala (2004) conducted a study to test this portion of Bowen’s theory and found that there was little support for this assumption that individuals with the same levels of differentiation will tend to marry each other. On the other hand, the same study validated some other components of Bowen’s Theory, and found a significant relationship between differentiation and chronic anxiety, marital satisfaction, and psychological distress. Another recent study also supports Bowen’s view that decreasing emotional reactivity (increasing differentiation) toward one’s parents helps in reducing psychological stress (Bartle-Haring & Probst, 2004). Yet another study supports Bowen’s view that differentiation has an impact on how individuals perceive stress in their lives (Murdock & Gore, 2004).
There is no doubt that Bowen is the most important figure in the first generation of this family tree. His theories and his practice have dramatically advanced the work of family therapy. While a few holes can be found in his theory, and others will always debate the emphasis that should be given to different parts of the theory, there is no doubt that the foundation he developed will continue to be used by many therapists and researchers to come.

Other First-Generation Theorists

For the purposes of this study, the other first-generation theorists in the chart are not nearly as important as Murray Bowen. There are two main reasons for this. First, the others each owe a certain amount of their systems thinking to Bowen anyway. Their first publications on family work followed his by between 5 and 10 years. As their works are reviewed, there are also obvious signs of “inheritance” from Bowen’s work. What this means to the literature review is that there is less need to discuss all the concepts they share all over again under the name of each theorist. Instead I will focus my attention on a few key ways in which their writings and practice differ from Bowen.

Second, the curriculum for the program at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary was based on Bowen Theory and others who based their work on his foundational theories. Therefore, the other theorists, while certainly worth examination and review in general, are not as relevant to this particular study.

So why are they discussed at all? There are several reasons for this. First, for the sake of thoroughness these theorists deserve at least a brief review. I want to make sure nothing is left out that might be helpful to understanding the whole range of literature that is relevant to this topic. Second, these theorists are occasionally referred to in some of
the studies applying the theory (See “Studies Applying and Testing the Theory,” below). To have covered generally who they are and what their contributions are will help make those references more understandable. Finally, since there is so much overlap in some of the core concepts of the theories, sometimes a case example or a description from one of these other first-generation theorists might be more easily comprehended than Bowen’s own description and therefore help the reader actually implement the concept with a better understanding of the big picture.

Salvador Minuchin

Salvador Minuchin’s systems work carries the descriptor of “structural” family therapy. While his theory is clearly based on the family as a unit or system, he did not choose to keep the word “system” in his description of his work. Nor does he use the word “theory.” His term for his work is “Structural Family Therapy,” or SFT (Minuchin, 2009). Minuchin’s work focuses on how families operate as a system and their structure within the system. By attending to the organization of the family and the rules and guidelines family members use to make decisions, Minuchin forms an impression of the family and the way family members work together. He notes different amounts of power family members have in making decisions and pays special attention to the degree of flexibility or rigidity within the structure of the family (Minuchin, 1974).

Key concepts in Minuchin’s understanding of the family include structure, subsystems, boundaries, alignments, and coalitions. Structures can be temporary or long-standing and consist of the sum total of the various rules and patterns that have developed over the years regarding who interacts with whom and in what ways. In Minuchin’s view, there should be a hierarchical structure in the family in which parents have more
power than the children and older children have more responsibilities than younger children. Parents tend to take on different roles such as one becoming more of the caregiver while the other may be the disciplinarian. Children learn the rules of how the parents carry out these roles and how they vary with different children or in different circumstances—like when the other parent or extended family are present or in public. In order to help dysfunctional families change, a therapist must be aware of these family rules that form the current structure of the family.

While Bowen’s theory tends to take its analysis up the family tree to look at historical and possibly repeating patterns, Minuchin’s methods put more focus on going deeper down within the nuclear family system by looking for subsystems. Subsystems are then analyzed in very similar ways to the entire system. The primary subsystem is the husband-wife or marital subsystem having to do with meeting the changing needs of the two partners over the years of the marriage. Minuchin would describe the parental subsystem as a separate but overlapping subsystem. The roles, rules, and boundaries in these two subsystems will be somewhat different and are worthy of diagramming and exploring separately. The parental subsystem in some families could be composed of one parent and an aunt or grandfather or someone else—sometimes even an older sibling. Other subsystems include sibling subsystems—one of which may include all the siblings—and others may be composed of various combinations of siblings. These subsystems may change more rapidly as the children go through different developmental phases. There are also parent-child subsystems, and various alliances and coalitions may arise based on the differing roles, skills, and problems of individual family members in the various subsystems.
Alignments and coalitions are terms that Minuchin (1974) uses to describe the typical ways that subsystems within the family react to crises or even daily events. “Alignments refer to the ways that family members join with each other or oppose each other in dealing with an activity. Coalitions refer to alliances between family members against another family member” (Sharf, 2008, p. 491). Some of these are flexible and change with the circumstances. Sometimes alignments and coalitions are fixed and depended upon heavily. For example, they can be used by a mother and daughter working together to control a disruptive father. As Minuchin begins describing examples of these alignments and coalitions, it carries strong resemblances to Bowen’s lines of conflict, fusion, or cutoff between different people in the genogram. Triangles become obvious. Minuchin does not argue against any of these concepts of Bowen’s, but he focuses more specifically on the immediate family, and he does use a very specific definition of the term triangle. He describes it as a coalition in which “each parent demands that the child side with him against the other parent” (Minuchin, 1974, p. 102). This is one place where a person trying to implement Bowen Theory could find it a little confusing if they picked up some of Minuchin’s work and tried to use it right alongside of Bowen’s.

Minuchin (1974) uses the term boundaries as another way to describe the rules of interaction regarding who can participate, and how, in the system and various subsystems. He also describes and diagrams these boundaries as having varying degrees of permeability. Enmeshed families (what Bowen would refer to as highly fused) have highly permeable boundaries, while disengaged families (Bowen would say distant or even cut off) have quite nonpermeable or rigid boundaries. It is very important for a
therapist using Structural Family Therapy (SFT) to understand these boundaries, along with the other structures of subsystems, alignments, and coalitions, in order for them to decide how to join with the family and make suggestions for change.

This study is not about practicing the art of Structural Family Therapy (SFT), but summarizing a few of the terms used in SFT may be helpful. The reason all of the mapping of the structural elements described above is important to the SFT therapist is because it allows them to then set goals for change (Aponte & Van Deuson, 1981). To pursue these goals, the SFT therapist may try to alter coalitions and alliances, instruct the family to act out a conflict (called enactment), make a suggestion and repeat the message or change the length of time for a particular interaction (applying intensity), rearrange the seating of the family members and change the distance between them as a means of changing boundaries, or find ways to reframe an event or situation. Minuchin, Rosman, and Baker (1978) describe how reframing can be helpful in working with a family with an anorexic child by giving a different explanation so that a constructive change can occur in the family situation. There may be a number of different ways to do this, but one example would be to label the behavior as “stubborn” rather than “sick.” This can make it possible for the adolescent and the family to see the problem as not necessarily the sole responsibility of the child, but that there may be various ways the family can address the “stubbornness” together. If it continues to be labelled “sickness,” the implication is that it is all on the adolescent and that it is out of her control. The therapist will use this reframe as a way to present anorexia as a family problem that can be approached by changing subsystems, boundaries, and coalitions.
Salvador Minuchin’s work can be very effective in the hands of a skilled structural family therapist. While differing terms might be a little confusing to a clergyperson trying to apply Bowen Theory to their family and congregational setting, there are some ways it can still be helpful. When Bowen’s work is thought of in the broad terms of increasing self-differentiation and taking responsibility for your own responsiveness to others in whatever patterns or triangles in which you find yourself, understanding of the system you are in is very important. Carefully and consciously applied, I believe that many of Minuchin’s structural concepts can help bring understanding, and therefore better application of the basic Bowen strategy.

Jay Haley

We now move from “structural” to “strategic.” The dotted line between Minuchin and Haley in the diagram is meant to convey that there is a very clear “descendence” that Haley acknowledges. Haley’s time spent working with Minuchin was very important to his developing theoretical approach to family systems, and although his theory is not as developed as Minuchin’s, it can be seen coming through in his detailed writings (1963, 1971a, 1971b, 1973, 1976, 1979, 1984, 1996; Haley & Richeport-Haley, 2003) about his treatment approach (Sharf, 2008, p. 495). Although Milton Erickson is outside of my chart, Haley (1973) attributes him as a strong influence in his development as well.

Haley’s strategic family therapy emphasizes problem solution rather than insight as its primary goal. Haley, like Minuchin, observes the interaction among family members, paying special attention to power relationships and to the ways parents deal with power. He basically views relationships as power struggles and is interested in
understanding how they are defined (1976). Sharf (2008) says the difference between structural and strategic approaches is the attention given by strategic family therapists to symptoms. “For Haley, symptoms are an unacknowledged way of communicating within the family system, usually when there is no other solution to a problem” (p. 495). This is not unlike Bowen’s views of symptoms—whether psychological, relational, or physical.

There is nothing in Haley’s work that is directly contradictory to Bowen’s theories. The two most obvious differences are the emphasis on the immediate, current family rather than the family tree—this being inherited from Minuchin—and the difference of having an emphasis on a very solution-focused goal. Some of Haley’s straightforward goal-oriented techniques could be helpful tools in the hands of a coach working with a clergyperson in the context of overall Bowen work.

Virginia Satir

Creativity and warmth characterize Satir’s work with families. She was known for attending to the feelings of family members and working with them on day-to-day functioning while empathetically dealing with their emotional experiences in the family. She focused on developing a sense of strength and self-worth and bringing flexibility into family situations to initiate change. She was noted for her communication skills and she worked to help families develop effective communication skills within the family (Satir, 1972).

The term “humanistic” is applied to Satir’s work (Sharf, 2008), not so much in terms of the traditional philosophical meaning, but to describe her personal, empathetic style of “being human” with the families she worked with. If there is anything that
should be taken from Virginia Satir’s work and applied to clergy and congregational work, it would be this tone and texture of her work.

Carl Whitaker

It could be debated whether Carl Whitaker should even be classed as a “theorist” because of his position of not trying to spell things out. There is very little “theory” to describe. He might better be categorized as simply a practitioner. However, if one concedes that the idea of using intuition more than a structured or strategic plan of how to deal with a family’s issues is a “theory,” then he can be called a “theorist.” Whitaker (1976) even goes so far as to claim that theory is a hindrance in clinical work, and that is why he preferred to use an intuitive approach using the therapist’s own resources.

Whitaker is included in this review because of his influence in the family therapy field and because of his contribution to dealing with the unconscious. Bowen Theory recognizes how often patterns of reactivity happen unconsciously. To begin to address this, the person or his or her coach must find ways to bring these things into consciousness. Whitaker’s intuition was put to good use in listening for impulses and symbols of unconscious behavior. Reading through some of his narratives of sessions (C. A. Whitaker & Keith, 1981) could be very helpful to clergy and coaches wanting to be more attuned to catching the clues of what is happening in the unconscious mind before it comes out in a reactive behavior.

Second-Generation Theorists: Bowen’s Disciples

Describing the second generation of the chart is very similar to the first generation in the sense that there is one theorist, in this case, Edwin H. Friedman, who is of much greater interest to this study than all of the others. The reasons are very similar to those
described above. The program at LPTS was based more on Friedman’s work than any of
the other theorists in this generation. Additionally, Friedman is the one who identified
the reasons and the ways that Bowen Theory is so uniquely pertinent to clergy and
congregations.

Each of the people in this generation had significant contact with Bowen and in
their work, research, and writing reflect quite well his work. Some have published as co-
authors with Bowen (Bowen et al., 1991; Bowen & Sagar, 1997; M. E. Kerr & Bowen,
1988) or have included significant pieces of Bowen’s writing in their own publications
(Gilbert, 1998, 2006; M. E. Kerr & Bowen, 2003). Because these authors are still in the
“lineage” of Bowen, their writings can be even more helpful to this current study than
those who share the first generation with Bowen.

Michael Kerr

Dr. Michael Kerr worked with Bowen when he was a resident fresh out of
medical school and after some time in the military returned to Georgetown again and
worked with Bowen for more than 20 years. Even Bowen said of Dr. Kerr, “He probably
knows more about my theoretical, therapeutic, and organizational orientation than any
other person” (M. E. Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 339). Dr. Kerr co-authored two books with
Bowen, Family Evaluation (M. E. Kerr & Bowen, 1988) and One Family’s Story (M. E.
Kerr & Bowen, 2003). He has also authored many journal articles. Family Evaluation is
an excellent resource for clear examples of how to evaluate families based on Bowen
Theory, which can be useful to the clergy application.

While Kerr has not given any significant attention to clergy and congregations, he
did write an article called Application of Family Systems Theory to a Work System (1982)
in which he gives a narrative description of a work system he personally was involved in at a psychiatric unit of a military hospital. He draws out the triangles and the relationship challenges in them and how they shifted when staff members left or came. At one point he found himself being put in the lead position and realized with a fresh reality all the system pressures that were inherent in that position—no matter who the person was filling that position! Any clergyperson reading this article will immediately see the applications and lessons for a congregational setting and will find it very helpful—especially recognizing that a part of a clergyperson’s role is often as a supervisor in a work setting.

**Monica McGoldrick**

McGoldrick is another of those who worked with Bowen and learned directly from him. She does not stray far from Bowen’s work, and what she adds that is helpful to this study is an excellent work (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985) on how to most effectively use genograms in doing family systems work. She has also written the most comprehensive work on understanding women in family systems work (McGoldrick, Anderson, & Walsh, 1989). Clergywomen or those working with them would do well to study this volume. Finally, *You Can Go Home Again* (McGoldrick, 1995) is very helpful for individuals wanting to pursue reconnections with their families. It is written to the individual rather than to therapists or coaches and is very easy to follow.

**Roberta Gilbert**

Roberta Gilbert had considerable experience with psychoanalytic theory and psychoanalysis before she ever heard of Bowen or his new theories. She was well established as a psychiatrist in Kansas City and was busy teaching in two medical schools
when she decided to look into Bowen’s teachings. She first thought he was way off base, but in the early 1980s she decided she had to study it further and enrolled in the Special Postgraduate Program in Family Theory and Therapy at the Georgetown Family Center. She began to grasp, and appreciate, Bowen’s Family Systems Theory. She began using it in her practice and found the ideas were contributing personally to her own life as well. She made the transition to Bowen’s new theories and in 1987 moved to the Washington, D.C., area where she became a faculty member of the Georgetown Family Center and began working directly with Bowen.

She became very skilled at highlighting the differences between individual psychoanalytic theory (where she had come from) and systems theory. She wrote *Extraordinary Relationships* (Gilbert, 1998), in which she articulated these differences and used detailed clinical descriptions to illustrate various abstract theoretical points of systems theory. Michael Kerr (1998) says that “Dr. Gilbert’s descriptions help the patterns jump out at the reader, getting beyond focusing on what is wrong with people—beyond diagnoses, beyond blaming self or others” (p. x).

Gilbert also addresses many common questions that come up with Bowen’s theories, and she gives practical answers that bring the abstract theoretical points down to things people can put into practice. However, Gilbert’s book is not just a practical guide about how to apply the abstract theory. She also expands the theory by making applications to larger nonfamily systems. She carefully applies the basic concepts of Bowen’s theory to organizations, workplace settings, friendships, and even international relations. Gilbert does address congregations and the clergy situation in particular.
However, I do not find her descriptions of application to congregational life to be as clear and insightful as Edwin Friedman’s or as others in the next generation of this family tree.

Gilbert also wrote a short summary of Bowen Theory, called *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory* (2006), which is a good, clear, concise description of the theory and is helpful for anyone wanting a quick overview.

**Daniel Papero**

Dr. Daniel V. Papero had graduate training in social work and then entered postgraduate training in Family Systems Theory and psychotherapy at the Georgetown University Family Center. In 1982, Dr. Bowen invited him to join the faculty of the Georgetown University Family Center where he still serves today. According to the Bowen Center (2009b) website,

He has written numerous articles and book chapters on various aspects of family systems theory and family psychotherapy and, in 1990, published a basic introduction to family systems, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*. He serves on the editorial board of *Family Systems* and of the *Family Business Client.* (para. 2)

Papero’s book (1990) is just as the website says, “a basic introduction,” and does not expand theory or describe any new studies that validate the theory. Papero’s contribution is explaining it again in different words and with different illustrations. It creates the possibility that some who may not be fully grasping the theory from the other sources they have read might better comprehend it with his descriptions and explanations.

**Bowen Center et al.**

This title was originally used by Dr. Ott (2009) in her version of this family tree. She grouped those who are carrying on the work at the Bowen Center to acknowledge that they are still carrying on his work and teaching it, but none of them have individually
made major contributions to the theory. At the same time, the center itself is a great resource for those continuing to study applications of this theory, and it would leave a gap in the “family tree” to not acknowledge this “offspring” of Bowen’s work.

Edwin H. Friedman

Rabbi Edwin H. Friedman is definitely the one who gets the credit for bringing Bowen Theory or Family Systems Theory to church (or synagogue) through his landmark work on family process in church and synagogue, *Generation to Generation* (1985). Friedman starts out by tracing the history of systems thinking and reviews the basic concepts of family theory that are drawn on in the rest of the book. He describes the following as the five basic concepts of Family Systems Theory that are most important for doing this work in the context of clergy and congregations: (a) the identified patient, (b) homeostasis, (c) differentiation of self, (d) extended family field, and (e) emotional triangles. Friedman does not bother to note that these are *not* the same as the eight that Bowen describes as the core of his theory. It can be shown, however, that these five are clearly *in* Bowen Theory— they are just not the ones that Bowen himself emphasizes as core concepts.

As Friedman (1985) goes on to describe important concepts to identify and understand in the families of a congregation, he makes it plain that there are two contexts the clergy reader needs to keep in mind. All these concepts have a two-fold purpose: first, to describe emotional process in an area of family life that we encounter in our parishioners, and second, to establish a framework for understanding those same dynamics when they appear in the interlocking emotional systems of our congregational ‘families’ and in our own [families]. (p. 67)

From the introduction all the way through, Friedman keeps reminding his clergy readers that applying these principles to themselves is going to be the crucial piece that
makes the whole concept effective. Acquiring expertise on the topic of Family Systems Theory without making personal application will do very little to achieve long-term impact on the congregations. He explains why: “Leadership has inherent power because effecting a change in relationship systems is facilitated more fundamentally by how leaders function within their families than by the quantity of their expertise” (p. 2).

How family theory applies in various work systems is explained, and then Friedman describes why congregational family process is a little bit different from most other work systems.

Everything that has been said thus far about emotional process in personal families is equally applicable to emotional process in churches. . . . These too are families. They function as organic structures in their own right. . . . But religious institutions not only function like families, they also contain families. Indeed, they often derive their very structure from families. Thus, emotional process in religious organizations not only mirrors emotional process in personal families, but also, both types of family systems plug into one another. That is a major reason why unresolved issues in any of the clergy’s three families can produce symptoms in one of the others, and why within that emotional interlock often lies the key to knowledge or to further stress. (p. 195)

Finally, Friedman concludes his work with two chapters dealing with the personal families of the clergy, tying in all the implications that have been set up previously.

The importance of Friedman’s work to those studying the relational and leadership health of clergy and congregations cannot be overstated. He brought Bowen’s Family Systems Theory to church! He did not just make a casual suggestion that since Bowen had shown how family systems dynamics can play out in a work system, maybe we should consider making that same application in church work systems. What he did was far more substantial than that. He showed how the very structure and culture of congregations is the most apt context in which to apply the theories on which Bowen had been working. The fact that a clergyperson’s job function is continually working with,
relating to, caring for, and settling issues with “three distinct families whose emotional forces interlock: the families within the congregation, our congregations, and our own” (p. 1) makes Bowen’s theories more relevant to clergy and congregations than most any other social phenomenon. Friedman was not only very clear in showing why this was true, but he went on to show many examples, with detailed recommendations, of how clergy can use this knowledge not just to solve a problem, but to accomplish good.

Friedman built a very solid theoretical foundation for those interested in the health of family relationships over generations, in more effective and healthy clergy leadership, and in healthy congregations, to keep building and improving on for years to come. And that is exactly what has been happening in the “Third Generation.”

Third Generation: Focus on Clergy and Congregations

In the third generation in the chart, each of the authors has the same basic objective—to use this well-established theory of Murray Bowen together with the insights of Edwin Friedman to try to help create healthier clergy and congregations. The two that stand out the most are Peter Steinke and Ron Richardson.

Peter L. Steinke (1993) has followed up on Friedman’s work with case studies from his own experience and by simply restating the same ideas in different ways for greater clarity. He has also expanded on Friedman’s work by drawing on current physical health knowledge as metaphors and illustrations of congregational health (Steinke, 1996). His depiction of “The Immune Congregation” is very helpful in better understanding the symptoms of a “sick” congregation, and it further explains how a congregation can build health and the ability to maintain health in spite of various threats to the system.
Ronald W. Richardson made his first real contribution to this topic by writing a “how-to” approach called *Family Ties That Bind* (1987) to help a person process his or her own family-of-origin issues. He has also written on birth order with an awareness of the systems approach (R. W. Richardson & L. A. Richardson, 1990), and has rewritten many of the concepts of Friedman’s work in ways that are more readable (R. W. Richardson, 1996). Most recently Richardson (2005) has put forward a whole book focusing in on the all-important relational health of the pastor in connection with his or her own personal family.

Other authors have repeated the same material in other words with other illustrations although not adding much to the overall conceptual framework (Anderson & Fitzgerald, 1978; Bradshaw, 1995; Carder, 1991; Fitchett, 1979; Halstead, 1998; Henry, Chertok, & Keys, 1991; Johnson, 1992; Lyon, 2001; Shealy, 1996).

**Studies Applying and Testing the Theory**

By this point in the review of the literature, it is apparent that the theory has been well-described, well-illustrated, and well-applied to clergy and congregations. What is needed now is even more rubber-meets-the-road descriptions showing these concepts in actual practice. What current studies go further, not just with Bowen Theory in general, but in clergy and congregational settings in particular?

Many studies in the last 10 to 20 years have described applications of the concepts in particular settings or with specific groups of people (Burge, 2002; Gamble, 1990; Gottwald, 2004; Graff, 1999; Pleva, 2003; Robertson, 1982; Rodriguez, 2000; Rymes, 1986; Shealy, 1996; Taylor, 1993; Tran, 1995). Two of the most interesting and relevant to this study were Pleva’s (2003) dissertation on how judicatory officials could coach
pastors into stances of higher functional differentiation, and G. S. Robinson’s (2002) “Managing Others by Defining Yourself.” Anderson and Fitzgerald (1978) also approached the very beginning of the process and suggested that before entering the ministry, prospective clergy should begin to work through their family-of-origin issues. Gamble’s (1990) study of the “intentional model” for pastoral leadership design also applies these concepts.

While each of these studies in some way applies the concepts first put forward by Murray Bowen and later applied to church circles by Edwin Friedman and others, and while some of them suggest ways of actually impacting the pastor’s own family, there is something clearly missing. I have found no studies evaluating the outcomes in the actual attitudes and practices of the clergy participants in any of the many programs that are designed to help them process through their family-of-origin issues. That is where this current study adds to the literature base a rich description of the actual outcomes of a program designed to help clergy over time make the kinds of system changes in their own lives and leadership that will ultimately benefit any congregation in which they exercise leadership.

Summary

It is well recognized in the literature that Murray Bowen initiated a historic shift in the understanding and practice of family therapy. Some would even suggest that “family” therapy did not really exist before he introduced the concepts of Family Systems Theory. We have seen how Bowen brought circularity or “systems thinking” to what had previously been an isolated individualized linear process. This started a landslide of new research, experimentation, and theory development.
Something this new could have been expected to fragment in many different directions as more therapists and theorists grappled with and researched the concepts. What the Family Systems Theory Literature Family Tree (Figure 4) shows, however, is that there was quite a natural progression of building on the theory in a manner much like a family tree. Just as a person can see physical features and personality or character traits from grandparents showing up in the next few generations in a human family, a similar kind of development is quite obvious in the Family Systems Theory literature. This provides a strong and rich theoretical framework to study further.

The area of further study pursued here is the application to clergy leadership and their function in congregations. The literature in this area is rich and full as has been shown above. Now this study will build on a “great family heritage” by looking more closely to see what outcomes are found in clergy who learn and apply the theory to their own families and their congregational families—the “Family of God.”
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

My research question for this study was this: In what ways have clergy persons who understood and personally applied concepts learned in Clergy Family Systems training programs experienced positive changes in their leadership attitudes and practices? I pursued the answer to this question through a qualitative case study in which I was the primary research instrument. My main source of data was in-depth person-to-person interviews. In this chapter I give the context of the study, address the issues of using myself as a research instrument, describe the research design including sampling considerations and how the data were collected. I detail the data analysis process and how I addressed trustworthiness, generalizability, and ethical issues. I also give the rationale for presenting the data through the use of composite narratives.

Context of the Study

This study describes results in the lives of clergy who participated in a training program offered by the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. The first year of the program was called “Family Systems Seminar” and was offered as continuing education for practicing clergy of all denominations. It also offered a track for Doctor of Ministry students to take it for elective credits. This seminar met once each month from October 21, 1999, through April 27, 2000. This was the first time
the seminary offered this particular program. They offered the same thing again in 2000-
second-year program was called “Family Systems Clergy Self-Leadership” and was only
open to clergy who had taken the first year of the training in one of the three previous
sessions. The subjects of my study were those who had participated in both the first-year
program and the advanced seminar.

To develop interest in the first program, the seminary had sponsored a 1-day
seminar on September 16, 1999, called “How Your Church Family Works,” presented by
Peter Steinke. His seminar was based on his book by the same title (1993). The subject
of the book and seminar was drawn from the Family Systems theories of Murray Bowen
and from the applications of Bowen’s theories made to clergy and congregations by
Rabbi Edwin H. Friedman. Steinke sought to help clergy and interested lay people
understand congregations as emotional systems. By explaining the functioning or
dysfunctioning of congregations from this vantage point, Steinke showed how
congregational leaders could work with the systems of their congregations in a healthier
way to bring better functioning and greater success in accomplishing the church’s God-
given mission. Over 100 people attended the 1-day seminar. Thirty signed up to take the
year-long program.

I had long been interested in the relational dynamics of congregations and
families. Since congregational health was a subject area in which I had done
considerable reading, I was immediately interested in hearing Peter Steinke. I had also
recently taken a course in qualitative research and was watching for contexts in which I
might do some qualitative study. So I attended the 1-day seminar and immediately knew
that I wanted to study this topic further. I signed up for the year-long program with the idea that I would be a “participant-observer.” I did not know at the time that this would become my dissertation topic, but I knew I would do some kind of study not only of the topic, but also of the process of learning. So from the beginning I kept notes both as a participant and as an observer.

The 30 clergy who signed up for the first year-long monthly seminar came from many different backgrounds and experiences. Denominations represented included Baptist, Catholic, Church of God in Christ, Episcopal, Lutheran, Non-Denominational, Presbyterian, Quaker, Unitarian, United Methodist, and with my participation, Seventh-day Adventist. Sixteen were male and 14 female. The age span was from the mid-20s to the early 60s.

The brief description of the course was,

In this intensive seven-month seminar, the basic concepts of family system theory will be presented. Both didactic and experiential learning will be utilized. A part of the experiential design will come in the process by which participants will be encouraged by various assignments to look at the interfacing of their own families of origin, and of their families of choice, with the congregational families they serve. Because of the personal dimension of the seminar, we ask all participants to make a covenant to confidentiality which reverently holds personal information that emerges. (Ferguson & Carter, 1999, p. 1)

The textbooks were Friedman’s Generation to Generation (1985) and Ron Richardson’s Family Ties That Bind (1987). The reading assignments and topics for each day including the daily schedule can be found in Appendix C.

Even with 30 participants, close connections were made over the months spent together. The experiential learning exercises were conducted in small groups in which there was plenty of time for sharing. Participants worked at constructing their family-of-origin genograms and describing the emotional dynamics of those in their small groups.
As concepts from the readings were discussed in the larger group, there was often time taken for discussion of particular applications people were making in their current ministry roles. Many were facing extreme difficulties with all different kinds of situations. Clergypersons encouraged each other, prayed together, and sometimes met in smaller groups outside of class time.

While the content material was very much appreciated, and many clergy spoke of appreciating the support and connections they made there, I realized early on that my real question was, “What difference is this going to make over time?” Eventually this persistent question developed into the ultimate research question of this study.

There was some discussion on the last day of what could be done next. The request was made to the seminary that it consider sponsoring an opportunity to pursue the topic and the process to another level. I was excited about the prospects of this because I really wanted to know what difference this learning process could make in the long term if people continued to follow it.

The next two academic years the seminary offered the same first-year program again. Other clergy participated each of those years. In the summer of 2002 the seminary announced that it would offer an “advanced” program for any who had taken the first program. Seventeen of us signed up. This group of clergy had a similar mix of denominational backgrounds, age, and gender. More than half of the group was clergy who I had participated with in the first program in 1999-2000.

This advanced program was similar in format, but more emphasis was placed on participants sharing case studies and less on the instructors presenting content material. It was described this way:
The general daily format looks like this. A member of the group will prepare and present a case study that describes a critical event in their church family/system that the group member would like consultation about. An outline will be provided with the intention to help the presenter be structured and self-focused, not other-focused. Approximately one and a half hours will be given to this exercise, and we will try to cover two a day. Additionally, there will be some review of didactic material and, in small groups, there will be more in-depth personal genogram work.

The format assumes that the participants are in a covenant relationship which not only includes a rotation of case study presentation and confidentiality, but also the willingness to challenge and support one another in the journey towards becoming a more self-defined leader. (Ferguson & Sawyer, 2002, p. 1)

The course description and the syllabus for the second-year program are found in Appendix D. An outline describing the Case Study assignment and how to structure the presentation of the case study appears in Appendix E.

The second-year program was well appreciated by the participating clergy. The discussions tended to go deeper, as most of us had been grappling with applying these concepts for 2 to 3 years already. There were already previous relationships to be built upon, and there was quite a high level of trust among the participants. Many of the participants even at that time spoke of this being one of the most helpful continuing education experiences they had been through.

As I continued my studies in Leadership at Andrews University, I selected this as my dissertation topic, did my literature review, and got a proposal accepted. After completing all the appropriate academic approvals I was able to begin conducting interviews just a little over 3 years after the completion of the advanced seminar. I was very fortunate to be able to interview most of the participants in person. One was deceased, one declined to participate, and one was unreachable. Including myself, I collected interview data from 14 of the original 17 participants.
Self as Research Instrument

As I stated in chapter 1, I have personal experience with congregational “families” that are sick systems. My history is not only as a minister for over 20 years, but also as a preacher’s kid (PK) for more than 20 years before that. In both roles I have seen system-oriented relationship difficulties and the pain that results in congregations and families. I am very interested in finding ways to bring wholeness and health to congregations. Most qualitative research interests do originate from these kinds of personal experiences and a long interest in a topic that develops from personal history. My own “lived” experience around congregations and my philosophical orientation “that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6) flows well into a qualitative study of this subject. A qualitative study or naturalistic inquiry “implies a direct concern with experience as it is ‘lived’ or ‘felt’ or ‘undergone’” (Sherman & Webb, 1988, p. 7). This is why I have pursued this investigation by use of a qualitative methodology.

Because qualitative research is field focused, that is, it “tends to study situations and objects intact” (Eisner, 1998, p. 33), my personal participation in these programs served me well in allowing me to be “the instrument that engages the situation and makes sense of it” (Eisner, 1998, p. 34). I have drawn on research journal entries made during the course of the LPTS program, case studies presented, genograms, some shared journal entries of other participants, and the personal interviews conducted 3 years after the formal program was completed.

In qualitative studies where the researcher is the primary instrument for gathering and analyzing data, there are great opportunities for collecting and producing meaningful
information much richer than can be gathered through a paper or electronic instrument with a list of questions and a multiple selection of prescribed answers. The difficulty of the investigator being the primary instrument is that he or she is also limited by being human—that is, “mistakes are made, opportunities are missed, personal biases interfere” (Merriam, 1998, p. 20). Of course human instruments are not necessarily more fallible than any other research instrument, but it is still important to maximize the benefits of the instrument and minimize the shortcomings.

Shortcomings of the human instrument can be mediated considerably by identifying at the outset of the study the personal values, assumptions, and biases of the investigator that may impact the collection and analyzing of the data and the reporting of the findings. I have already described a number of details about my background and my philosophical commitments, but I will now review these briefly and add some possible implications.

With well over 48 years of being either a preacher’s kid or being a preacher, I have had plenty of opportunities to see systemic relationship difficulties and the pain they cause in congregations and families. In many cases that pain directly impacted my family and, specifically, me—both as a child and later as an adult. This has the potential of biasing me toward an undue cynicism of the whole realm of congregational systems and clergy leaders. Such a cynicism could seriously skew my collection and interpretation of the data. However, even though I am aware of a great amount of sickness, dysfunction, and pain in church circles, I still choose to continue a career deeply embedded in congregations. I do this because I see more than the downsides; I also see the potential for good. I see the possibility of healing and of people coming to
wholeness. Many characteristics that can make a church a dangerous place for people can also make it a very powerful place for good. I believe that if those who are involved in these congregational systems gain greater understanding of how they operate, and if there is spiritually empowered development in self-awareness and self-differentiation together with greater interpersonal communication skills, these systems can become much more of a blessing than a curse to those who participate in them.

In saying this, I have just exposed another bias of mine in relationship to the topic of this study. I believe that increased understanding of systems theories as applied to clergy and congregations can improve those systems. I am aware of this bias and have consciously made it a topic of review in peer examinations by colleagues—one of my strategies to assure internal validity.

As is often the case, experiences that significantly impact a person can unfold as either strengths or weaknesses. I have explained how my 40 plus years in and around churches and ministers could be a weakness as the researcher in this study, but the same experience also has the potential of being an even greater strength. All three of the characteristics that Merriam (1998) puts forward as the most essential for a successful investigator as “primary instrument” (pp. 20-24) have been strengthened in me through my experiences with church and ministry. Through many uncertainties in ministry I have developed a strong tolerance for ambiguity. In dealing with many challenges and crises it has been essential for me to become a good communicator. Just as physical pain or injury can heighten sensitivity in a particular place in the body, I believe that relational pain can also heighten sensitivity and create a deeper capacity for empathy. It has been clear in the process of this research that these qualities have been needed. I have received
feedback from interviewees, peer reviewers, and instructors confirming that I have indeed exhibited these qualities while pursuing this project.

Now that I have openly discussed my background, interests, potential biases, as well as the assets I bring as the primary research instrument, I will describe the rest of the methodological considerations that are important to this study.

**Research Design**

The particular qualitative methodology I have selected is the case study. All qualitative research has certain characteristics in common. According to Merriam (1998, pp. 6-9) these are the five key common characteristics of qualitative research: (a) the researcher is interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, (b) the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, (c) it usually involves field work, (d) it primarily employs an inductive research strategy, and (e) the product is richly descriptive. Different authors have described numerous variations or genres of the basic qualitative theme (p. 10). Merriam’s list is only five: (a) basic or generic qualitative study, (b) ethnographic study, (c) phenomenology, (d) grounded theory, and (e) case study.

I have chosen the case study design in particular because, like other researchers, I am “interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing” (Merriam, 1998, p. 28). Specifically, this study is particularistic and descriptive. It exhibits Shaw’s (1978) assertion that case studies “concentrate attention on the way particular groups of people confront specific problems, taking a holistic view of the situation” (p. 2).
Sampling Considerations

To conduct a study a researcher must determine what to observe and when, where, and of whom, to make the observations. The process of making these choices is called sampling. Merriam (1998) says that in qualitative research there are usually two levels of sampling required. The first level is to select the case to be studied, and the second is to select the individual people or instances within the case. Of course, if the case being studied consists of a single individual, there would not be a second level of sampling. Every case study, however, has to have the first level of sampling—the selection of the case itself.

According to Merriam, this is a very important process because “the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case” (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). L. M. Smith (1978) defines it as a “bounded system.” Merriam simply calls it “a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (1998, p. 27). So the boundaries of the case must be clearly defined.

The “case” in this current study is defined as the voluntary self-study program for clergy that was held at the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (LPTS) in 1999-2000 and 2002-2003 in which the family systems theories of Bowen as applied by Friedman, Steinke, Richardson, and others were studied and applied. The case is specifically limited to those clergypersons who attended both sessions.

This case was chosen largely out of convenience. It fit the topic of my interest, was in the same city, and fit into my schedule. There were other benefits to selecting this case as well. The participants were not in any way required to attend. In other words, they chose to participate based on their own interest in and perceived value of the topic.
They were practicing clergy rather than full-time students. I believed that these factors would make it more likely that real-life application of the principles would occur. While there are other seminaries and training organizations that offer a similar program, the one described above is the case under study here.

The second level of sampling Merriam describes involves the selection of a sample of particular individuals who participated in the program—or “the case.” I was fortunate that in the case I chose there were only 17 individuals. Rather than designing a specific strategy of choosing a subset of this group, I decided to attempt to collect data from every one possible. This turned out to be quite successful. Only one person declined to participate, one was deceased, and one was unreachable. So, out of 17 total participants in the case, I was able to conduct interviews with 14 clergy persons in all.

Data Collection

In a qualitative investigation, data are generally conveyed through words rather than numbers. Patton (1990) clearly describes three kinds of word data that can be collected: (a) “direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge” obtained through interviews, (b) “detailed descriptions of people’s activities, behaviors, actions” recorded in observations, and (c) “excerpts, quotations, or entire passages” extracted from various types of documents (p. 10). I collected data primarily from the first category through the interviews described below. I am also making use of Patton’s second category by drawing on my research journal field notes.

Interviews

purpose of an interview is to obtain a special kind of information” (p. 71). The “special kind of information” she is referring to is that information we cannot personally, directly observe, such as feelings, thoughts, or past behaviors that the researcher was not present to observe and that cannot be replicated. This kind of information must be sought in the interview and recorded in the words of the person who was there or who had the feelings and the thoughts.

My interviews were semi-structured and informal. I had open-ended interview questions as starting points for the conversation, but I also left the flexibility to diverge from these questions as necessary (see Appendix A: Interview Protocol to see the questions used).

The interviewees were able to choose whether the interview took place at their home, their place of work, or a neutral location that I made available near their home. A few interviews were conducted over the phone when an in-person interview was not possible.

Interviews were recorded on a digital audio recorder so that they could easily be transcribed, so it was not necessary to take complete notes during the interview. I did take some notes on key themes I noticed during the interviews. I also made notes on things I observed that might not come through in a later reviewing of the audio, such as facial expressions or gestures. I did some transcribing myself with audio software on the computer with the use of a foot pedal for convenience in fast forwarding and rewinding, starting and stopping. Some of the interviews I emailed to a friend to transcribe.
Drawings

To engage another part of the brain and gather additional information about participants’ experiences in the LPTS program, participants were asked to draw a picture of how things were for them before the training experience and how things were after it. They were told there were no other rules. They could draw a diagram, a picture, symbols, or anything that came to mind. They were provided a blank piece of white paper and a set of colored felt-tip markers. In a few cases the colored pens were not available, and two of the drawings had to be faxed and were therefore not done in color either. Participants were given time to draw and usually described their drawing as they drew. Sometimes they were asked a few simple clarifying questions as they drew.

The drawings are included in the text in places where the characteristics of the drawing are most relevant to the discussion.

Research Journal

As a participant in the LPTS program myself, I kept a journal throughout the process. I kept all handouts and other materials shared by instructors and class participants. I took notes on the content instructors presented as well as interactions among the participants. I noted verbal and non-verbal responses to the presentations and the discussions. These notes have been another source of data for my study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data. It involves “consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read” (Merriam, 1998, p. 178).
One of the most enjoyable aspects of my data analysis was knowing that I was embracing a methodology that freely acknowledges that “simultaneous data collection and analysis occurs both in and out of the field,” and that “you can be doing some rudimentary analysis while you are in the process of collecting data, as well as between data collection activities” (Merriam, 1998, p. 162).

My analysis was beginning even while I was participating in the intervention. I was making notes on some of the themes that were occurring to me even then. I was noting characteristics of participants and wondering how those would play out in later results in their ministry leadership practices.

Early analysis was also occurring as I began conducting interviews. I chose to do my first interview with a participant whom I had observed to be very astute in the actual class times. I remembered that one of his case studies had been especially well done. What had impressed me the most about his study was not just his grasp of the concepts of Family Systems Theory as applied to clergy and congregations, but how courageously he had applied it to himself in the analysis of his case. He had been quite open and vulnerable as he described some details of his own genogram and how he thought these details may have impacted his behavior in the difficult scenario in his case study. I had a hunch that interviewing him as one of the first interviews might give me a stronger start in the simultaneous collection and analysis process. It did help me more clearly identify some themes to watch for in my other interviews, and analyzing that first interview led me to make some small revisions to how I asked some of my interview questions. As I continued the interviews I found myself comparing, reflecting, making notes, and continuing to analyze possible themes and groupings as the data were emerging.
Some additional analysis occurred during the transcribing process, but serious category construction went full speed ahead once the transcriptions were done. According to Merriam (1998), “devising categories is largely an intuitive process, but it is also systematic and informed by the study’s purpose, the investigator’s orientation and knowledge, and the meanings made explicit by the participants themselves” (p. 179). I worked with transcripts, note cards, and post-it notes, with colleagues helping me lay everything out on a large living room floor. True to the constant comparative method, we compared segments of data looking for similarities and differences. We began grouping data and suggesting possible category names to each other. We followed Merriam’s (1998, p. 183) guidelines for determining the efficacy of categories.

Gradually categories were beginning to be constructed. As I continued looking for that “recurring pattern that cuts across ‘the preponderance’ of the data” (Merriam, 1998, p. 179), however, I became overwhelmed with the “preponderance” of the data and decided that to be systematic I really needed an easier way to manage all the quotes from the data and the categories that were being constructed. So I researched the current qualitative data analysis software options and chose MaxQDA2 for doing my coding. I put in all the codes I had found so far, matching them to the actual data in the software. Then I went back through it in several more iterative processes looking for more snippets of the data and comparing and contrasting to be sure the categories were appropriate for each marked piece of data. This process greatly improved my confidence that something was not literally “falling through the cracks” in my analysis of the data.
Trustworthiness

Since I have already stated that I am interested in bringing wholeness and health to congregations, I naturally want readers of this study to be confident that whatever it says can be trusted. Trust comes with some kind of accounting for the study’s validity and reliability, “and the nature of qualitative research means that this accounting takes different forms than in more positivist, quantitative research” (Merriam, 1998, p. 198). Following are the ways I have addressed the trustworthiness of this study.

Internal Validity

Internal validity deals with the question of how research findings match reality. As Merriam (1998) so aptly points out, “Internal validity in all research thus hinges on the meaning of reality” (p. 201). Since I have already disclosed that my philosophical orientation views reality as being socially constructed, I naturally find ways to validate reality through relationship and understanding of both the researcher and those being observed, as well as how each understands the world. I concur with Merriam (1998) that because human beings are the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research, interpretations of reality are accessed directly through their observations and interviews. We are thus ‘closer’ to reality than if a data collection instrument had been interjected between us and the participants. . . . When reality is viewed in this manner, internal validity is a definite strength of qualitative research. (p. 203)

This being understood, I used three methods to confirm the emerging findings: (a) I did member checks by taking data and tentative interpretations, with appropriate precautions for protecting the privacy of my subjects, back to the people from whom they were derived to see if they believed the results were plausible, (b) I obtained peer examination from my colleagues involved in leadership research, and (c) I sought out a second kind of peer examination, not from fellow researchers, but from professional
clergy. By using these three separate methods of confirmation and comparing among the three, I was able to triangulate my results.

Reliability

Reliability, referring to the extent to which research findings can be replicated, is problematic in the social sciences “simply because human behavior is never static” (Merriam, 1991, p. 205). Nor are qualitative researchers seeking something static and mechanically repeatable. When describing and explaining the world as those in the world experience it, a static, boxed, isolated result would contradict the original purpose. It would be like Steinbeck’s (Steinbeck & Ricketts, 1941) pickled fish—like someone sitting in a laboratory, opening “an evil smelling jar,” removing a “stiff colorless fish from formalin solution” and counting the spines (p. 2)—which is nothing like the experience of encountering that fish on the end of a line coming over the rail of a boat in the middle of the Sea of Cortez.

This is why I prefer Lincoln and Guba’s (1985, p. 288) “dependability” or “consistency” of the results obtained from the data. The concern I address in this study, then, is “not whether findings will be found again but whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (Merriam, 1998, p. 206, emphasis in original). This consistency has been demonstrated by the triangulation of multiple methods to confirm findings as described above under internal validity. In addition, explaining my own assumptions as researcher and describing the theories behind my study allows the reader to see the consistency between the results and the data collected.
Generalizability

Generalizability or external validity is concerned with the extent to which the findings can be applied to other situations. Once again, these very terms come from a long history of a very different world view and set of assumptions. “In qualitative research, a single case or small nonrandom sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (Merriam, 1998, p. 208, emphasis in original). So, while generalization is not necessary to value the results of this study, there are effective means to generalize from a qualitative research perspective.

Eisner (1998) points out that besides the process of generalization, we must consider the content of generalization. He says that “what generalizes is what one learns” (p. 199). He names the major categories of content as (a) skills, (b) images, and (c) ideas. According to Eisner, “skills generalize as they are applied” (p. 199). This study describes in some detail skills that were learned by the participants in the study. These skills can generalize as they are applied in other settings.

Images can be generalized as well. Images do not come only from photographs, paintings, and diagrams. “Images also emerge from words whose form and content have the ability to generate images. . . . Because qualitative writing is often vivid and concrete, its capacity for generating images is particularly strong” (Eisner, 1998, p. 199). This study presents qualitative writing that aims to be vivid and concrete and intends to create images. That is the purpose of the alternative representations in chapter 5. To the extent that images are created by these narratives, those images will be generalizable or transferable to another situation.
Another form of generalizability applies to this study as well. It is called “reader or users generalizability” by Merriam (1998, p. 211). This concept leaves the decisions about how it may or may not apply in the reader’s context up to the reader. Practitioners in law and medicine are well accustomed to taking responsibility to determine the applicability of one case to another, and this should not be too much to expect of readers of this study. The responsibility I have taken as the researcher is to provide a rich, thick description such that readers are able to determine how closely their situations match the research situation and, therefore, whether and how the findings can be transferred.

It is also my intention that the writing of the narratives in this study generates enough, and meaningful enough, images that the reader will have no trouble taking those images and knowing where and how those images can be applied to other settings.

**Ethical Issues**

As the researcher I have endeavored to handle well the potential ethical issues of this study by taking seriously Robert Stake’s (1994) observation that “qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict” (p. 244). I have practiced good manners and a strict code of ethics in this study. Since a majority of my data have come through personal interviews, I have been very conscious of my “researcher’s stance,” and have been both properly ethical and humane. I think Patton’s (1990) description has helped me maintain these two important values. He says not only that the interviewer’s job “is first and foremost to gather data,” but he adds that the interviewer is neither a judge nor a therapist nor “a cold slab of granite—unresponsive to the human issues, including great suffering and pain, that may unfold during an interview” (p. 354).
Another aspect of my data collection is that of observer. A potential ethical issue here is my role as participant and observer, and the awareness of this by those observed. The important consideration here is that while I did not make a specific statement of my observation, every participant was encouraged to keep a journal of the process, discussions, and their personal reflections. So the journaling that I did and have drawn on in this study was no different from the journaling that everyone in the group was doing.

The use of Composite Narratives, described next, was another way I was able to be ethical in handling the data, in the form of people’s stories, in such a way that the “private spaces” of the participants were carefully protected. All other ethical issues relevant to this study are covered in Appendix B: Answers to Important IRB Questions.

**Composite Narratives**

Chapter 4 presents Pastor Dave’s Prayer Journal, Greg’s Story, and Pam’s Story. All three are narratives written to represent the themes that emerged in the analysis of this study’s data. These narratives are written with the intention of creating a rich flowing picture of the clergy experience that will produce an image in the reader’s mind. The goal is that this image accurately portrays the experiences found in this study so that readers may make transfers to other situations. These narratives also serve the function of protecting the identities of the participants.

When I arranged the interviews, several of the clergypersons expressed concern that details of their experiences would be properly disguised so their identities would not be revealed or be too easily discernable in whatever writing might be done. Since the case under study occurred in the city of Louisville, Kentucky, at the Louisville
Presbyterian Theological Seminary and all of the clergy were within driving distance of the seminary, there is a genuine concern that identities could be discovered. Some of the clergy served prominent churches in the city. Many shared very difficult and sensitive stories from their congregations to help explain the impact of the Clergy Family Systems program in their lives and ministry. While all names, some places, and even denominational references have been changed to help protect the privacy of these 14 individuals, the use of composites is an even stronger additional safeguard to their identities.

The use of composite narratives to protect identities and still find a way to let these voices be heard is well represented in the literature. L. Richardson (1990) presents “collective story” as a way of showing the value of using narrative to give voice to those who otherwise would not be heard. “The collective story displays an individual’s story by narrativizing the experiences of the social category to which the individual belongs, rather than by telling the particular individual’s story” (p. 25). In this study I have used three narratives to let the voices and experiences of these clergy be heard in a much wider audience. If their stories were not told in this manner, they would only be heard by a close trusted friend here or there and their experiences could not benefit others.

Dennison (1996) used a composite presentation of his results from studying 12 retired New Zealand athletes. He wrote three short stories to describe their experiences. Among his reasons for using this method were that “stories show instead of tell; they are less author-centered; they allow the reader to interpret and make meaning . . . and, most important, they effectively communicate what has been learned” (p. 352). Each of these is also true for my study.
When studying 11 women in ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, Bumgardner (2005) chose a similar methodology. She wrote two narratives, one that generally represented the strongest themes from 8 of the women and the other one that represented themes expressed by at least 6 of the women. Her primary motivation was protecting the identities of these women who were still in ministry while still allowing their voices to be heard. One of her participants who read the stories said, “You have disguised us well” (p. 37).

When studying middle-school literacy coaches, A. T. Smith (2009) found the tool of composite narrative to result in “a cohesive narrative that stresses themes in the data while also portraying the contexts in which these themes occur” (p. 7).

Pastor Dave, Greg, and Pam are not actual individuals; they are a blending of the stories of all 14 participants interviewed. The journal entries in Pastor Dave’s Prayer Journal are made up, but they are made up carefully from the analysis of the transcripts of hours of interviews. Participants also shared written case studies, class notes, genograms, and even some journal entries, which were all added to my data collection. In some places the actual wordings from journal entries or case studies or responses to interview questions are used in Pastor Dave’s Prayer Journal and in the stories of Greg and Pam. While all three narratives may contain some data from all 14 interviews, there are some general groupings. Pastor Dave’s Prayer Journal expresses themes that come mostly from four male respondents. Greg’s Story expounds themes primarily from two male respondents whose experiences had many parallels. Pam’s Story is the most varied because of the other characters brought in towards the end of the story. However, a majority of the themes in her story come from a compilation of five of the female
respondents. The information in the section “Disconfirming Data” in chapter 5 is a careful blending of three respondents including both males and females.

All of the drawings presented in this study are the actual drawings of participants. The names attached to these drawings have all been changed, and the descriptions of their drawings have largely been left untouched. In a few cases some details that may have compromised identity have been altered to protect the participants.

As a check on the effectiveness and accuracy of these narratives, I have had them reviewed by colleagues who have reviewed the actual interview transcripts as well and validated that the themes portrayed in the narratives represent well the themes found in the interviews and other documents.
CHAPTER FOUR

ALTERNATIVE REPRESENTATIONS

Introduction

This chapter presents three alternative representations of the data in this case study with the intention of providing a “rich ‘thick’ description of the phenomenon under study” (Merriam, 1998, p. 29). It is my intention that these representations of the participants’ experiences will elicit images and provide a clear understanding of their changed leadership attitudes and practices resulting from participation in the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary’s Clergy Family Systems Training program described in chapter 3. Before presenting these stories, I briefly introduce the themes that the reader will encounter by the time they have read all three representations. Each alternative representation is also followed by a discussion of the themes found in that story.

Themes to Notice

Chapter 3 detailed the development of the themes through the constant comparative method, and described the process of following Merriam’s (1998, pp. 183-184) five guidelines for determining the efficacy of the categories. Here those categories or themes are described in four groupings: Understanding and Relevance, Overall Value, Awarenesses, and Attitudes and Practices. Each of these will be described in more detail
in chapter 5. Here brief definitions of each theme are given so that they will be easier to recognize in reading the alternative representations.

Understanding and Relevance

_Understanding and Relevance_ was a theme that had to be validated in order for the rest of the themes to have any meaning. The research question asks in what ways clergy persons who understood and personally applied concepts learned in Clergy Family Systems training programs experienced positive changes in their leadership attitudes and practices. Positive changes in attitudes and practices would be irrelevant if it could not be established that they had understanding. Their perceived relevance was found to be key to clergy making personal application of the concepts. The alternative representations that follow do not make a point of highlighting understanding and perceived relevance, but it should be obvious from the rest of each story that both were present.

Overall Value

_Overall Value_ indicates that the clergyperson felt positively about the overall value of having participated in the training program at the seminary. This was expressed in many different ways by different participants.

Awarenesses

_Awarenesses_ are divided into two parts: _More Aware of Systems_ and _More Aware of Self_. Both of these awarenesses proved to be significant in clergy actually making changes in attitudes and practices. Without awareness, change is essentially impossible.
When the finding of *More Aware of Systems* is noted in the stories that follow, there is usually a brief indication of what aspect of systems theory the person in the story was aware of. The most common awareness that was described in the data was the awareness of the “big picture” or the “framework” of emotional systems.

The theme *More Aware of Self* describes an awareness of self in relationship to the concepts of Family Systems Theory as applied to clergy and congregations. Sometimes a person can be aware of the theory but not see how they are playing a role in the current example of the theory. Naturally, this awareness is also crucial to someone making real change.

**Attitudes and Practices**

The last grouping of themes is the heart of what this study was seeking to find—what actually changed in the clergyperson’s *Attitudes and Practices*. Each of these themes is named with the word “more” or “less” to indicate not only the type of change, but in which direction. This helps these theme names be “more exacting in capturing the meaning of the phenomenon” (Merriam, 1998, p. 184). The definitions that follow help to validate that the guidelines of “mutually exclusive,” “sensitizing,” and “conceptually congruent” were followed (p. 184).

*Less Reactive* refers to a person having less external reactivity to various system stimuli. This reactivity could be directly lashing out at the one who provoked it, or it could be an external reaction unleashed on someone else. It does not necessarily mean a violent reaction. It can also be a passive-aggressive or “poor me” reaction.

*Less Anxious* is used to describe a reduction in a more general and mostly *internal* anxiety. An increase in anxiety often leads to more external reactions. If it is difficult to
determine into which category a particular piece of data goes, the data that reflect more of an internal response go into *Less Anxious* and the more external response goes into *Less Reactive*.

*Less Entangled* indicates that a person is less caught up in the systems processes—less “sucked-in” to the dysfunction. *Less Entangled* could be considered the same as more self-differentiated, but I am using the term that directly rose out of the data for two reasons: (a) it is more true to the data itself and (b) each of the changes in attitudes and practices described in the other themes could be attributed to self-differentiation as well. In keeping with Merriam’s fifth guideline I am keeping *Less Entangled* on the same conceptual level of abstraction as the rest of the themes in this grouping. If I categorized all responses as an example of someone being more self-differentiated I would lose valuable detail.

*Less Taking Things Personally* is really self-explanatory and meets Merriam’s fourth guideline very well—it gives an outsider a pretty good idea of what it means.

*Less Blaming* is also self-explanatory. It indicates a person finds themselves less often trying to “pass the buck,” getting the stress off of them and on to someone else.

*More Understanding* refers to having a more understanding attitude of others. It is not meant to describe an intellectual understanding of theory, but a personal, caring understanding of another person.

*More Calm* describes a personal sense of calm. It could seem to be just another way of saying *Less Reactive* or *Less Anxious*. The reason this is kept as a separate theme is because when analyzing the data it was found that some people were aware of this
increased sense of calm without being able to link it to a lowered sense of anxiety or reactivity. It repeatedly rose from the data distinct from their “opposite” counterparts.

*More Calming* describes a person’s impact on others. This is not the same as *being* calm. It is about being able to have a calming *effect* on others. Their impact on others was more calming than it had been before.

These are the themes the reader will see portrayed in the stories that follow. They will be discussed briefly after each story and then in more detail in chapter 5.

**Pastor Dave’s Prayer Journal**

Pastor Dave keeps a prayer journal. Sometimes he prays out loud, sometimes silently, and sometimes he writes his prayers in this journal. Most days something gets written in the journal even if he also prays out loud. Following are excerpts from the journal that reveal his learning and growth process and ultimately the impacts of his participation in the Clergy Family Systems program at LPTS.

*September 16, 1999* – Good morning Lord, I’m really excited about having made the choice to do something today that is not just “getting done what has to get done.” I get so *tired* of just “doing my duties!” I know those things are important, but I really like doing something that feels like investing in myself—making myself better at what I do—not just doing it all over and over again. Please help me to get good out of this day. I’ve heard good things about this Peter Steinke and I believe I will learn some things today that will really help me make another leap forward in my ministry. Please give me an open mind and heart. Help me to be humble enough to learn today. AMEN.

*September 16, 1999, PM* – Lord, I don’t know if I wanted to get *this* humble! Some things I heard today made it very clear that a big part of what probably needs to
change in my ministry is me! It’s a little frightening, Lord. Please give me the strength and courage to tackle it. I’ve had kind of an odd feeling in the back of my mind that I needed to someday deal with some of my own family issues, but I never realized before today how seriously important this is to my ministry. It’s still a little overwhelming to me! I don’t think I’m ready to understand everything I’m about to begin to understand. At the same time, I do know that until I understand what is wrong, I’ll never be able to fix it. May Your grace be sufficient for me. AMEN.

September 29, 1999 – OK, Lord. I did it. I signed up for that advanced practicum course on Family Systems at the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. I hope this is the right thing to do. I feel a little like I have just started down a huge waterslide and I’m now past the point of no return. However fast things go, whichever way they turn—I won’t be able to stop it now. It is like I have been exposed to something that I am compelled to pursue even though it is scary going in and I have no idea what I will find as I go. Please keep me safe, and grant me the courage to keep on. AMEN.

October 20, 1999, PM – Is this a joke God? Are you concealing a chuckle tonight as you look down at me from your great white throne? Did you think I wasn’t convinced enough that I needed to take this practicum course at the seminary? I get it! I can see (after the elders meeting tonight) that I really need this! OK?! I get it! That was a nightmare! I’d love to listen in on your heavenly Trinity huddle and hear that you just did this to make sure I didn’t back out on going to the first seminar tomorrow. But somehow I don’t think that’s it. I think what I got a glimpse of tonight was what is really real in many, many churches. I think it is an epidemic of family dysfunction in the
family of God—that most pastors don’t know how to deal with. So, yes, I’m going.

Don’t worry about it (as if God ever worried).

Lord, I really am scared and excited at the same time. I’ve been reading

*Generation to Generation* (Friedman, 1985) and even though I set out to read chapters 1 and 2, I didn’t have to go past page 2 of the introduction to find this:

The concepts of family process bring together in one perspective counseling, administration, officiating, preaching, personal growth, and leadership. Such a perspective has the effect of reintegration rather than disintegration, and, just as important, the family model offers something beyond an approach to problem solving. It presents an organic way of thinking that unifies our families and ourselves with the forces of Creation. (p. 2)

It makes sense to me that we need more than just simple “problem-solving.” We need something that goes deeper. What I saw in the meeting tonight didn’t just need a simple 5-step problem-solving process. It needs something more “organic” as Friedman says—something that gets to the root of how people behave together in a congregational setting.

Lord you know I have had in my annual goals the last few years to improve my leadership skills. But then I read (still haven’t gotten past page 2 of this book), “In fact, family theory suggests that *leadership is itself a therapeutic modality*” (Friedman, 1985, p. 2). Is *therapy* actually one of the leadership “skills” I need? That’s not what I signed up for. But then (still on page 2, believe it or not) I read, “Leadership has inherent power because effecting a change in relationship systems is facilitated more fundamentally by how leaders function within their families than by the quantity of their expertise.”

All of the sudden, Lord, my desire to be a better leader (a noble and professional aspiration) has gotten very *personal*. At the same time, I realize that this may prepare me
for better spiritual leadership and ministry to the people as well. It makes sense to me because

the emotional system of any family, parishioner or congregation, can always ‘jam’ the spiritual messages it is receiving. Thus to whatever extent we can use our unique access to families to foster emotional healing, we are always at every moment preparing the way for other, more spiritual experiences to come later. (Friedman, 1985, pp. 6-7)

Lord, you know me. You know that is what I really want—to “prepare the way for other, more spiritual experiences.” You know I’m only in this line of work because of what you have done in my life. I know there is a lot wrong in my life, but you gave me a spiritual experience—you touched me in 1995, and I am committed to helping other people find you and get in “touch” with you too. So, please help me find my way through this learning process so that I truly can better “prepare the way” for others. AMEN.

October 21, 1999, PM – Gracious God. Thank you! It was a great day. I have received what you promised when you said, “The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail” (Isa 58:11, NIV).

I didn’t realize until today how “sun-scorched” the “land” around me has gotten lately. I have felt like I really couldn’t be open with anyone around here. The things that are going on are stressful and I don’t know whom to trust. The other pastors in my denomination here in the city seem to be in extremely different places than I am. I get the feeling that they not only wouldn’t understand where I’m at, but they would also believe it was completely wrong! They would probably go back to their churches and
ask their elders to “pray for Pastor Dave” and leave the non-verbal impression that something must be going very wrong with me.

The people I was with today are definitely different! They are all different in different ways. I’m not as attracted to some of them as to others, but overall? Overall, these are clergy who have similar struggles as I have and they want to do something about it! They are ready to be open and honest and seek understanding and solutions. They seem to realize that just preaching stronger sermons, lining up more texts, and doing more evangelism isn’t necessarily what is going to heal the people and strengthen the church! I love it! Thank you for watering this garden (me) in this sun-scorched land! I didn’t realize how much I needed this. Plus! The topic is scratching where I have been itching and didn’t even know it!

We started genograms today. Very interesting! It was nice to have the confidentiality held as a high standard, and besides that I don’t think anyone there knows anybody I know! One question, “What one message did you receive from your family that you are also passing on to your children?” I didn’t like the question, but it is good for me to think about such things. The message from my family? “Don’t take all day!” or “Time’s wasting!” God, thank you that you are patient and long-suffering with me. You’re not rushing me. AMEN.

November 10, 1999 – Dear Lord, I’m just about a week away from my next seminar day and I’m trying to deal with these assignments. Why is it so hard? They look like such simple questions on the page:

1. What were some of the openly acknowledged and spoken rules in your family?
2. What were some of the unspoken rules about having and expressing feelings?

3. What were the spoken and unspoken rules in your family about handling differences and conflicts between family members?

4. Have you continued to have the same rules for conflict in your present relationships, or have you changed them? Are your present rules just the reverse of the old rules? Are they really new?

These aren’t complex or difficult-to-understand questions. But that is what I’m finding about this “systems” stuff. The questions are hard because they address deeper parts. If it were just an academic challenge I would have no problem with it, but it’s not that kind of a challenge. Now I understand why more people aren’t pursuing this stuff—you have to look in the mirror—and deeper!

I had a fight with Vickie today. It was one of our “familiar” fights. We’ve probably had it a thousand times. But today, even as I was in the middle of it, I thought of this question of what the “unspoken rules of conflict” were in each of our respective families. That was it! I think we were both still trying to hold up the unspoken rules of our families of origin. In fact, it is almost like we are each trying to “win” for our families by maintaining our own family rule that has been “sanctified” by the generations before us—how stupid is that?

Then as I sat down here in my study to try to write to you about this, I wanted to try to write out the rules that clashed between us. All of a sudden it dawned on me that this was the same thing that was going on at the board meeting last week! The unspoken rule in my family was that Dad was always right. And it was almost like the joke that says, “Rule #1: Dad is always right. Rule #2: If Dad is wrong, refer to Rule #1.” Only
the nuance in my family that was added to this was, “If it appears that Dad might be wrong, anyone who finds himself thinking that must immediately feel guilty and ashamed for ever having thought to question Dad in the first place! And furthermore, if you are even slightly tempted to question this line of thinking just take one look at Dad’s face—just dare to look into his eyes and they will drill a hole through you that will convince you never to question this rule again! Never mind that you might have feelings about all this. That isn’t a part of the rules.”

Even as I write these words on the page I realize how dumb it looks. It seems so childish. It seems like any reasonable adult would just change their behavior! Yet, I have to be honest (at least to You! since you already know my heart anyway). I think I was trying to live out this rule in the board meeting. I was Dad. Something got my anxiety up, and I needed to be right! Why? Because Dad is always right! In the church family I am kind of “Dad.” When Sister Roberts tentatively brought up some information that might have made it look like I (Dad) was not right, I just turned and looked at her. I didn’t say anything for a few seconds—I just looked at her. I didn’t think, “I’ll give her the Dad-is-always-right stare.” I didn’t think anything at all. In fact, I was a little puzzled why things seemed to get tense in the room. I’m not sure what I did next. I just remember asking if anyone else had anything to say before we took the vote. No one did. We voted and went on with the meeting. It was no big clash or confrontation. Most people might say nothing happened. But as I think back I think I was playing the Dad role unconsciously and gave her my version of the Dad-is-always-right look. I’m thinking that is why things seemed to get so tense there for a few minutes. Apparently we are an “emotional system” like Bowen says. When anxiety rises in any
one of us, we somehow have the capacity (or curse) to pass it around to all of us at various levels. It’s like it spreads among us like a bad flu bug! And I can see that the more of us in the room that are not well differentiated, the easier it passes and the more it increases!

Of course I don’t know what happened after the meeting. I could speculate on what Sister Roberts did with that, or how it may have rippled in her own family when she got home. But that’s not where I want to go. I want to understand this enough that I can recognize it before it happens next time and choose a different response. Lord, will you please help me with this? It is embarrassing just to realize what happened, and I really don’t want to be setting up dynamics that make it hard for people to share their thoughts. I wonder if I dare share this with the small discussion group next week?

Please give me courage to face my mirror and take advantage of the learning community you brought me to—I really do want to be a well-watered garden, Lord!

AMEN.

*February 21, 2000* – Dear Father, I’m so glad for Eph 5:23: “Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.” If it depended on me, we’d be in really big trouble! I know I still have a leadership role to play. You have called me to pastoral ministry and I want to be faithful to that call. The last several months—since I started this Family Systems class at the seminary—I have been challenged as far as I think I can be stretched. Then the next month takes me even further! It is exciting and scary all at once! I do think I’m making progress in my processing these things, but sometimes it is hard to really see the evidence of progress.
This last session’s readings are still bouncing around in my head. Richardson’s (1987, p. 35) chapter called “How to Be True to Yourself and Still Have Friends” had examples that sounded just like Vickie and me. We have some work to do in our marriage around our togetherness and separateness. Lord, please help me find ways to take the lead in us getting the help we need without it seeming like I am criticizing her. I know she doesn’t feel like I’m very understanding, like I don’t listen well, etc. Help me to figure out how to listen—really listen, so that I do understand, and she knows it and feels it.

Then Friedman’s (1985) chapter on “Leadership and Self in a Congregational Family” really got me thinking. He says,

An organism tends to function best when its ‘head’ is well differentiated. The key to successful spiritual leadership, therefore, . . . has more to do with the leader’s capacity for self-definition than with the ability to motivate others. (p. 221)

Sometimes, Lord, I know I have felt like I’m not a very good motivator. I’ve wondered how I could become more charismatic. I try to “kick it up a notch” sometimes and I just feel fake! But reading this makes me think that’s not what I need at all. Please help me make (and see) progress on this process of self-definition! I know one of the areas I need help on is how easily I take things personally when someone may not have meant it that way—or even if they did—I still need to let things roll off my back more easily.

Lord, today, please grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can (me), and the wisdom to know the difference.

AMEN.
April 27, 2000, PM – Thank you, Father, for a great experience over these past 8 months. I can’t believe it’s over already! Today we all said our good-byes at the Clergy Family Systems class. It is amazing how close I feel to those people, and when I think about it, I’ve really only spent a total of 7 days with them! Yes, it was over 8 months, and we did get together a few times outside of class. But it was really great to share as deeply as we did about our lives and ministries. I can definitely say it was 100% worth it! Thank you, Lord! I can’t believe it was actually a hard decision whether or not to join in the first place. I am so glad I did.

One of the blessings I want to thank you for tonight is what happened in the closing exercises we did. I have been “complaining” to you for a while now how I need to see some results from my work. Today in the closing I was told some things that really surprised me. Several people shared the positive changes they can see in me! But they see me so little of my total life it was hard to believe them. I kind of quizzed a couple of them, and as they said more I realized that they have seen enough of me to notice the things they mentioned. That was very encouraging!

We weren’t “allowed” to say that we thought someone was “more self-differentiated” because that is so broad. So people were forced to be more specific. The two things I was told that I really believe are these: I am “more understanding of others,” and I “take things less personally.” That was one of the ones I followed up on. I asked Barb, “What did you see at the beginning so that you can say that is different now?” (Kind of a scary question.) She checked with me to make sure I wanted to hear it, and then shared an incident from the first class where she had said something in our small group and I obviously took it personally. It was embarrassing. I do remember the
incident. But Barb was kind and re-emphasized the positive change. That was really cool, God.

Here’s the best part! I decided to really take a risk! I came home and was sharing with Vickie about the last day of class. I decided to share what people had said about me and see what she had noticed at home. She actually said she agreed with them! She thinks I am more understanding. She also told me that she has noticed a change in how I talk about things that happen at church. She said she’s been thinking about it for a while but couldn’t quite figure out what it was. Then when I told her the “takes things less personally” it clicked for her. “That’s it!” she said. That was really cool to hear, Lord.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

January 8, 2002 – Dear Lord, Thanks so much for a great holiday season! Our services through Christmas and New Years are getting better every year! I really believe my leadership is getting stronger and stronger too. . . .

Although I feel a little “rusty” on some of the Family Systems stuff I studied in ’99 I know that it is still working away at me. Things come up every now and then that might have confused me before, and now I recognize it immediately as a systems issue. Sometimes I even go back and review some of my highlights in Generation to Generation to get me on the right track. . . .

August 2, 2002 – Dear Lord, Again, I praise you for the answers to prayer over the past few weeks. You are mighty to save!

I also want to praise you for the letter I got yesterday from the Seminary. I am so excited that they are doing a second round on Clergy Family Systems. Finally they are doing an “advanced” seminar. This one is only for those who have been through the first
one. I love it! We will be spending a lot of our time doing case studies and reviewing each other’s cases. I have several I have already thought of that I can’t wait to get feedback on!

Lord, today I pray that you would grant me the humility and patience and confidence in You to face the things I may need to face in myself to go further in my growth in these areas. I feel like I know a little more what I’m getting into than the first time, but I also know that there are things that conveniently hide outside of my awareness. With this group, those things will come to light somehow.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

November 21, 2002 – Good morning, Lord. Yesterday’s seminar with Pete Steinke back again was great! I’m preparing my case study for the next session and several things he said today really helped me see one of the parts I was missing. He said when you’re trying to recognize the disease process in a relationship system you should first look for where the virus of anxiety begins and how it is reinforced. “People lacking differentiation will spread the dis-ease.” He went on to give a great description of several “treatment” options for the dis-ease in the congregation. He said the immune capacity in relationship systems is the capacity to define self. Lord, please help me to stay clear about my own self-definition (self-differentiation). I liked his Martin Luther paraphrase, “Here I stand. I can do no other. It is neither good nor right to go against reason and conscience, or one’s own integrity.”

Lord, please help me write this case study up in such a way that I will get the maximum benefit from my classmates. I want to come back and help lead this congregation to some much needed healing on the Sullivan issue.
December 10, 2003 – Dear Lord, What a blessing it is to see a group of people working together so much more in harmony than in 1998 when I first got here. I’d like to forget the planning for the first Christmas service in 1998. I thought I had made a huge mistake in moving here! I also thought, “What a dysfunctional church!” It was true, but what I didn’t realize was that I needed as much healing as they did.

Anyway, the planning meeting last night was a dream by comparison. What made my day, though, was when Sister Roberts came up to me afterwards to thank me for my leadership. She said she wanted to “reflect” with me a little over the last 5 years that I have been here. (Shocked me to hear her use the word “reflect.”) Among other things she said that over these years she has noticed that I am a much more “understanding” pastor than I was when I first came. Of course she, along with the rest of the church, has heard me talk a lot about Family Systems concepts. But I hadn’t ever told her how she was one of the ones who accidentally helped me realize my need way back at the beginning. I reminded her of the topic and how I had given her that Dad-is-always-right stare. She was really pleased that I could even remember that board meeting incident in ’99, and she said again how much she appreciated me for my caring understanding of others.

She went on to tell me that I seemed to have picked up an ability to calm others too. She said that if there is a group with some agitation in it, and I come in, I seem to be able to help people calm down. She said, “It’s not like you say, ‘Calm down! Or else!’ It just happens because you’re there.”
Lord, I have to tell you, there couldn’t have been any sweeter words spoken!

Please grant me continued growth as a person, and as a leader.

AMEN.

Themes in Pastor Dave’s Prayer Journal

Pastor Dave’s Prayer Journal intends to take the reader “under the skin” of Pastor Dave—to a place where the reader gets the “real” story right from the beginning. What he writes to God is what is real to him. He is not hiding much from God. The first day of a class and even after several meetings, people tend to “put the best foot forward.” They show their best self. A lot gets faked. By using the Prayer Journal setting we are able to get to a deeper level.

Pastor Dave’s Prayer Journal also focuses more of its emphasis on the earlier part of the whole Clergy Family Systems training process that these clergypersons went through. It attempts to bring to light the kinds of issues and needs clergy were already aware of when then signed up for the class. It also attempts to show some of the things of which they were often not aware. While the later entries are more spread out on the calendar, it does go to a few months after the last class to show some of the overall satisfaction that was consistently present in the actual interviews.

The themes to be discussed from the Journal are: Understanding and Relevance, Overall Value, More Aware of Systems, More Aware of Self, Less Taking Things Personally, More Understanding, and More Calming.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, Understanding and Relevance was a theme that had to be validated in order for the rest of the themes to have any meaning.
Understanding was a prerequisite in the research question. Without a perceived relevance there would have been little application.

Dave’s September 16, 1999, entry intends to show that he perceived the topic to be relevant for him even before he had been to the first seminar. His next entry, after attending the seminar, shows that he understands enough to realize that this process is going to be about personal change, not just some academic learning. He also comments on the relevance he saw to his family and his church leadership. These two entries show what emerged from the data—that most of the participants understood enough to believe in the relevance very early in the process.

In the September 29, 1999, entry the reader should get a sense of the value of the training that Pastor Dave anticipates from the very beginning. In the next entry he describes an experience that leads him to write, “I really need this!” Many of the clergy who entered the program had experiences that had them in search of answers. While he does not have the answers yet, he has a sense he is on the right track to get some. More will be seen of Overall Value as the experience unfolds, but there is a sense of it very early.

As Pastor Dave contemplates some early quotes from Friedman (1985) in his October 20 entry, the reader can see that he is beginning in a very small way to be More Aware of Systems. When he says, “All of the sudden, Lord, my desire to be a better leader . . . has gotten very personal,” it is evident that he is at the very beginning stages of being More Aware of Self also.

On October 21, 1999, the Overall Value theme comes back up again. This time it is not about the value of the theory, but the value of the process. Dave finds the first
class with these other clergy people who are also eager to learn and apply to be very satisfying in his “sun-scorched land.” Through the data when Overall Value is described, it is almost as often about the collegiality of the process as it is about the value of the theory and its applications.

Dave’s awareness of systems and self grows over the next several entries. You hear him learning through the genogram process, the family-of-origin questions, and in the readings. When he describes his fight with his wife in the November 10, 1999, entry, the reader hopefully sees how having his eyes open to family issues while grappling with church issues brought breakthroughs on both sides. Pondering the “unspoken family rules” helped him not only understand what was going on between him and his wife, but it also gave him a deeper awareness of the system he was participating in at his board meeting. After thinking about it, he was able to see it as an emotional system according to Bowen’s theory. These are additional evidences of being More Aware of Systems and More Aware of Self. In this same journal entry the encounter with Sister Roberts is meant to set the stage for how he will later become More Understanding.

The February 21, 2000, entry intends to show some of the realities of the struggles with these issues. It is not an overnight fix. Dave grapples with difficulties in understanding his wife. He realizes that how he handles these issues at home has real impact on how he handles his congregation. Here the deeper understandings of the totality of Bowen Theory applied to clergy are coming more clear. This is another layer in the awareness of systems.

Pastor Dave is able to rejoice in some positive feedback in his April 27, 2000, entry. He finds that he has been observed to be Taking Things Less Personally. He also
gets kudos for being *More Understanding* of others. His bonus, something many other respondents have reported, is that something he has managed to improve in his work setting has changed in his home environment as well. This is not always true. But when that particular aspect of self-differentiation is dealt with, often the benefit carries across all systems in which the person is involved.

As Pastor Dave gets into the second year of training and begins to write in his journal about what is going on, it is my intention that the reader will see how his awareness of systems goes to a much deeper level. He has already managed many of the basic things that he discovered in the first year of the training. Now he is aware of more complex issues of the system in the church he pastors. He does not have to spend as much of his energy managing himself and his own anxiety and reactivity as he did earlier. Now he can look more at the bigger system and become aware of how his congregation needs to build a stronger “immune response” to the “dis-ease” being spread by some.

In Pastor Dave’s final entry I hope the reader understands a longer-term *Overall Value* that Pastor Dave appreciates about the process of learning and growing he has been through. This represents the respondents in this study who not only appreciated the value they gained in the first few months of working with systems, but especially the value seen in relationships that take longer to change. Pastor Dave gets feedback from Sister Roberts that he is not only *More Understanding*, but that he is also *More Calming*—meaning he not only has calm internally, but he also brings calm to others. Some changes in a system show results right away. Others take many years to reveal full value.

Pastor Dave, as the respondents he represents, intends to keep growing and applying Family Systems principles in his personal and professional life.
“I just can’t believe how well that turned out! I mean, 6 months ago, I thought it was all over for me here,” Pastor John said as he and his mentor, Pastor Greg, walked out to the parking lot.

“You handled the meeting well,” Greg said.

“Thanks, Greg. I guess that is part of it too. I actually feel like I did do a good job handling the meeting. I’m coming out feeling positive, and I’m not anxious about what is going to happen next. I’m just not worried about it! You know, my wife used to hate board meeting nights because I would come home all worked up about what happened and practically terrified about what might happen next. I would be worried about what Mr. Sanatuli thought, or wondering what Mrs. Doubletree would say to her sisters and the ladies at the quilting club, or what someone else might be griping about even though they didn’t say a word about it in the meeting. I would be so anxious about everything that it would make my wife anxious too. Then in the angst of all our discussion about it we would forget about our kids and wind up putting them to bed late without having worship or doing anything with and for them. I didn’t really understand then why it seemed like the kids would wind up getting stressed and would cry over some dumb little thing that wasn’t even related. That would make me angry and I’d snap at them, and then I would feel bad about that and worry that maybe my ministry wasn’t good for our kids! What a mess!” John finished with a big sigh.

“Those were some tough nights weren’t they?” Greg said gently.

“They sure were. Talk about emotional systems! We were living a textbook case of how intertwined and unhealthy systems can get. I’m glad I’m not still there.”
“You know what I think is great about how you feel about this meeting tonight?” asked Greg.

“What?” John was curious.

“You feel good about the meeting, but it’s not because everybody agreed on everything and so there was nothing to argue about. There were different opinions and very different viewpoints, and yet you handled it well, and you stayed clear about yourself and your leadership role in the meeting. You weren’t all entangled in the seaweed of the congregation’s emotional system. You were standing strong as yourself, with your views, and yet you were gentle, open, and still connected with the people.”

“For example . . .” Greg put his hand on John’s shoulder to add emphasis to his next phrase, “Mr. Sanatuli really wasn’t happy about the worship committee’s request, was he?”

“No, he wasn’t,” John said with a chuckle. “But the great thing about that is that his ‘unhappiness’ didn’t hook me and cause me to veer off course and later wonder what happened to me.”

“That’s exactly what I mean, John! You listened respectfully. You let him have his say, you still kept firm with your position, and you let the board make their vote. That is an example of what self-differentiation looks like! Then you set the board up—not to vote according to your opinion—but to understand that they could hear all the different opinions and still vote what they each believed was best for the church. That was nudging them to act in a self-differentiated way. You weren’t manipulating or arm-twisting, AND, you weren’t letting anybody else do that either! Hey, I’ve got to get on the road, John, but I’m really glad I came and sat in on your meeting with you tonight.
I’m really proud of how you’re doing.” Pastor Greg gave Pastor John an encouraging slap on the back and opened his car door. “Keep up the good work, and I’ll be interested to hear how the first week with two services goes. Let me know, OK?”

“Oh, I’ll definitely keep you up to date all the way along.” John said.

Greg got in his car and started it up for the drive home. As he pulled out of the church parking lot, he realized he was smiling. Yes, he felt good about the meeting too. He felt good because it had been fun to help John make some changes that were paying off in his ministry. He also felt good because it reminded him of himself a bit—and all the changes that he had made over the last several years.

Ever since Greg had gotten into the training program on Family Systems Theory at LPTS, he had done a lot of thinking, studying, praying, and changing. He had had quite a number of “aha” experiences as he studied and put the concepts into practice. He could easily remember when he had been sitting at the board table in his previous church across from a woman who seemed to have some unseen power to make him screw up in his leadership and then hate himself for it afterward. Now he understood why that happened. It had happened because he was unconsciously a part of the emotional system of the organization. He quite naturally played his own little part in the sick system. “His part” was one he was well-suited for because it was the “part” he had always played in his own family as he was growing up. So he knew it well. It felt comfortable, familiar, in a very frustrating way, and like he really did not know how to do any different. Now it was not that he consciously thought of all this and did it intentionally—not at all! In fact his first step in changing had been simply to see and understand what was going on.
“The strange thing,” Greg thought to himself, “was that even though I sort of knew that something was wrong, I always used to come to the conclusion that it had to do with what someone else did wrong, or how they behaved. It wasn’t like I was trying to shift the blame—but I just didn’t understand what I was contributing to the system and I had to come up with some explanation for what happened.”

The Bowen Theory, or what is sometimes just called “Systems Thinking,” was what had put all the puzzle pieces together for him in a way that he could understand what was happening. Then he began to be able to see his own patterns and be able to predict for himself how he would likely respond in various situations if he did not make an intentional effort to do otherwise. Once he could see that and understand the dynamics, then he was able to begin to work on interactions in his own original family tree. As he worked through this he was able to apply it in the system relationships at work and in his current nuclear family with his wife and two daughters.

“It’s just like the professor kept saying in our clergy class at the seminary,” Greg thought. “‘When you move higher on the scale of self-differentiation, you are less of a conduit for passing anxiety on through your systems—of whatever kind.’ So when I learned to be more differentiated in my family of origin, I was less anxious in all the systems I function in—work and home especially, and in turn I wasn’t as impacted by others’ anxiety and I passed much less on through the system.”

Just then Greg’s cell phone rang. The Bach Sonata ring tone meant it was his daughter Christy calling.

“Hi, honey. How are you doing?”

“Great, Dad. How are you?”
“I’m good. I’m driving home happy tonight.”

“Where have you been today?”

“I had a meeting with Pastor John down in Millersburg. It was a good meeting.”

“Oh, that’s great, Dad.” Christy hesitated like she had something more serious to talk about than this small talk.

“What’s on your mind tonight, Christy?” Greg asked.

“Oh, not much, Dad.” She paused and then went on cautiously, “I just thought I’d tell you about something I did today, uh, I mean . . . got done today. It’s no big deal or anything. . . . Just something I thought I’d tell you about before you got home—that’s all.”

Greg thought something sounded familiar about his daughter’s approach on the phone. It kind of sounded like her old way of trying to break some foreboding news to him gently over the phone—rather than in person so as to avoid getting the full brunt of his blowup right in her face. It saddened Greg a bit to realize that this had been necessary. For many years he had been very reactive to his daughters—and he felt bad about that—especially as he realized that she had been forced to come up with this well-planned strategy just to talk with him about difficult subjects on which they might disagree. Here she was 19 now, and according to societal norms she wouldn’t even have to talk to him about it—whatever “it” was.

Suddenly Greg realized there had been a several-second pause, so he quickly spoke up. “So, you just wanted to talk to me about it while I was at a safe distance, is that it?” he said with a chuckle.

“Oh, no it’s not that, Dad.”
“Oh, okay.”

“It’s just that . . . well, uh . . . okay, yes, I guess it is that, Dad. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, you don’t have to apologize, honey. I understand. I know my history.”

“Well, I am sorry, Dad, because I know you’re not like that anymore—well at least hardly at all!! But sometimes I kind of forget and I just do things like I always used to—just kind of out of habit I think. But I really don’t mean to be saying I don’t trust you, or that I’m afraid of you or anything. I’m really not, Dad. I really like what all that ‘systems junk’ has done to you.”

“Well that’s nice to hear, honey. Thank you. Thanks for being such a good sport as your poor old Dad has tried to change.”

“Well, I know I’ve had to do a little changing and adjusting too, so it’s okay. And I really don’t want to stay stuck in my old habits either. So, I’ll tell you what, Dad. How about we end this call, and I’ll just wait till you get home to tell you about my new belly button ring! Okay?”

“Belly button ring!?!?” Greg was truly surprised but responded with a light-hearted mock outburst, “What kind of lame-brained, ridiculous, outlandish, ludicrous, weird, hillbilly, hippie, insane kind of thing is that to do??”

Greg’s “outburst” was so overexaggerated and long-winded that Christy just burst out laughing. They both laughed together as Greg tried to go on with some more feigned rage but soon ran out of steam and words both.

“Oh, Dad. That was pretty funny, and I’m glad you can be so easy-going about it. I really am. But I also want to know what you really think.”

“You really want to know what I think?”
“Yeah, Dad. I do.”

“Well my dear . . .” Greg chose his words carefully. He realized that this really could have been a huge issue between them a year or two before this. He was thankful that he really did not feel uptight or stressed out about it. He actually felt calm inside, and he wanted to be honest and say what was really true for him but to do it from this place of calm. He felt that she really wanted to know and was willing to hear—that was kind of amazing in itself. He sensed that she actually felt pretty safe asking him—and so he wanted to respond with complete honesty in a gentle and loving way.

“I think you know that I think you are a very beautiful young woman.” He stopped as if that was all he had to say.

“I know, Dad. Go on.”

“And I think you’re plenty beautiful without adding anything more to yourself.” He paused briefly and then went on. “I think you also know that I’m not generally in favor of people poking holes in their bodies for such things. But I also want you to know that I love you dearly, and if that is something you want to do, it really is completely up to you—it’s your decision. And it is not going to make me love you any less—nothing you do could make me love you less. You know that, right?”

“Yes, Dad. I do. But I really want you to see it, and I hope, well, I guess I kind of hope you’ll like it.”

“Well, I promise you this, dear, I’ll look at it and appropriately admire it, and whatever I think of it, I’ll still like you. Okay?”

“Okay. Yeah, I guess that’s really good enough. Thanks,” she said with a little bit of sheepish embarrassment. “So, you’re not really mad at me are you, Dad?” She
asked the question even though she really knew the answer already. She just wanted to hear him say it again.

“I am not mad at you, honey. I love you ‘oodles!’ You’re a lovely young adult woman moving out into the world, and you will make some decisions that may not be the same as I would make. But that doesn’t make you wrong and me right, or you bad and me good. It means we sometimes choose differently.”

“I know, Dad.”

“I know you know. I just wanted to say it again.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, I’m almost home. Did you guys have something good to eat tonight? I’m starved.”

“Julie made some spinach ravioli tonight, and there’s still some left for you.”

“Mmmm. That sounds awesome! See you soon. Love you.”

“Bye, Dad.”

Greg closed his cell phone smiling to himself and kind of chuckling as he turned off the highway onto his street. He was so thankful for the things he had learned. Some of his friends still liked to bug him a bit about how “into” this theory he was, but he remembered Roberta Gilbert’s (2006) comment that “the better one is able to understand theory, the more one can use it and the more it becomes a way of thinking about life” (pp. 42-43). Greg was pleased with the changes this theory had made so far in his life.

He pulled into the garage and put the car in park. “Here I go!” he said to himself, “Belly button rings and spinach ravioli!”
Themes in Greg’s Story

In telling Greg’s Story I endeavored to show how several key themes from the data show up in the lives of clergypersons. Although it is called “Greg’s Story,” it actually tells two stories—John’s and Greg’s. In this way I intend to show how different respondents were at different places in their growth. It also gives a taste of how clergy described the importance of their connections with other clergy. Mentoring was also named as something very helpful in their continued growth. While this is not directly a theme in the study, including it in the story helps cast the discussion of the themes in a realistic context that is true to the experiences of the clergy in the study.

John’s Themes

The first part of Greg’s Story is actually about Pastor John. Pastor Greg, with a job in the conference office, was John’s mentor. Greg had coached John for some time, and the story of the meeting Greg attended is showing how Pastor John was able to keep from getting pulled into the system dynamics of his church family. It reveals how easy it would have been for him to be entangled in the church system in the very areas in which his own family system had left him with some unhelpful relationship patterns. The part of the story about Pastor John intends to specifically highlight the themes of More Aware of Systems, More Aware of Self, Less Entangled, and Less Anxious.

More Aware of Systems is shown by Pastor John’s describing how anxiety from the church system used to pass through him into his family system as well. He spoke of how confusing it used to be and how he could never understand what was going on. Now he does. He is more aware of how systems operate so that he can recognize it when it comes up—even in a heated moment. As John describes how that anxiety used to come
home with him and then ripple through his own family, the reader can see that he understands the big picture of how an emotional system works. He is aware of the Family Systems idea that an emotional system is a group, family, or organization of people who are closely enough connected that when anxiety rises in one it affects each of the others and is passed around the system.

More Aware of Self is demonstrated in John’s recounting how he used to get caught up with Mr. Sanatuli in meetings like this one. He had become aware of what his own part had been in things getting off course in the past. Now he is more aware of himself as it is happening and can consciously choose different behaviors—as he did in the meeting he had just chaired.

Less Entangled is shown in Greg’s complementing John for how he made room for everyone to share their views even though he felt the pressure from Mr. Sanatuli. Greg noted how John had developed enough self-differentiation to not get “entangled in the seaweed of the congregation’s emotional system.” John’s ability to stay connected at the same time is an important aspect of this theme. I tried to show in John’s story how clear respondents in the study were that being Less Entangled was not accomplished by completely cutting off and having no relationship. In Bowen Theory that would be an opposite dysfunction aptly called “cutoff.” Respondents in this study described an increased ability to be less entangled in the systems they lived and worked in while at the same time staying connected.

The theme Less Anxious runs throughout the conversation between John and Greg. John says, “I’m coming out feeling positive and I’m not anxious about what is going to happen next. I’m just not worried about it!” That is the freeing feeling that
many respondents in this study reported enjoying or appreciating the most. It was one of the most mentioned changes by clergy since the training. They really value feeling less anxious. John clearly understood that it was a movement toward better health and better leadership to be able to be in a meeting in which emotions were forcefully expressed yet remain a firm and steady leader through the process. In addition, after the meeting was over, he was not walking out carrying a bunch of anxiety from other people. My goal in this part of the story was to give a glimpse of the kind of relief respondents experienced as their anxiety levels dropped.

Something John’s part of the story does not say is intentional as well, though more subtle. John’s story does not tell exactly how he developed his “ability” to be hooked by other people’s emotions and thus get easily derailed. The reader may assume from the story that he and Greg may have processed this and that they both know John’s family-of-origin history on this, but by not highlighting this, the reader also realizes that knowing exactly where it came from is not nearly as important as learning how to manage it differently. My data show that this is one of the understandings of participants who went through the clergy family systems training. One participant said simply, “Rather than the blaming and projecting, I asked myself, what do I bring to this?” In this story, when Mr. Sanatuli is unhappy, John figures out what he can do differently without sacrificing his principles, his person, his leadership, or, indirectly, his own nuclear family’s health and happiness. He does this without having to take a long side trip off into discussing the family member in his family of origin (perhaps blaming, or at least describing the behavior) who seemed to be the triggering factor to his having developed a reaction that became the habit that was getting triggered by Mr. Sanatuli. All of that did
not matter as much as his getting strong enough in his own self-differentiation to be able to choose another course than the one that had become so “natural” for him. He does all this in spite of the fact that the various opinions shared in the meeting had varying degrees of strong attitude and emotion attached to them.

Greg’s Themes

The next part of the story is actually about Greg. At this point in the story it is my intention that the reader begin to get a sense of the Overall Value that Greg is appreciating about his learning in the area of family systems. The reader does not hear any hint of him being worked up or worried about all the emotion that got passed around in the room earlier and gets a sense of his satisfaction as he drives off realizing there is a smile on his face. He is carrying with him a general sense of calm. This transition in the story is intended to prepare the reader to understand that what has changed in Greg’s life is at a different level than what has changed in John’s life. John’s part of the story described someone who is just “getting it” in the early stages of applying Family Systems Theory to his life and ministry. Now in the rest of the story you get a glimpse into the life of a clergyman who is a little further down the road of applying the theory. This is to help describe the variance in progress found between participants. While they all took the training at the same time, there was still evidence that they progressed at different rates. Even though many of the same themes were identified, they showed up with different degrees of progress.

The themes that I endeavored to show in the rest of the story include Less Reactive, Less Blaming, More Understanding, and More Calm. The themes of More Aware of Systems and More Aware of Self show up in this part of the story as well,
because they naturally occurred in most of the clergys’ experience as a kind of precursor—almost a prerequisite—to the development of the other changes in attitudes and practices. Including them here gives the whole story an even closer depiction of the actual data.

As Greg first begins to reflect during his drive home, it is again clear that being *More Aware of Systems* and how they function is the very first step to having anything change. The story attempts to show how he not only understood how systems work, but that he went beyond a raw understanding of the concepts to a real awareness of how he functioned in various systems. Once he saw that, he began to develop a *real-time* awareness of himself in various systems situations. This shows the depth of meaning in the theme *More Aware of Self*.

The theme *Less Blaming* is depicted in Greg’s reflecting on how he tended to blame others—mostly because he did not understand how he was contributing to the problem. He recognizes that the blaming was just another way of passing anxiety around the system, yet he did not have the understanding or awareness needed to find his way out of that pattern. Someone could have even commented to him that he seemed to blame others a lot, but that probably would not have helped him as much as coming to understand why he did it in the first place. The good news to Greg, of course—that he is really happy about—is the actual result in his attitudes and practices of being *Less Blaming*.

The next part of Greg’s Story shows the human side of how these issues play out in some of the most important and personal relationships people have. Greg’s interaction with his daughter on the phone highlights how valuable it was to him to find the result in
his life of being Less Reactive. For Greg, his reactivity was such a habit that members of his family had developed strategies to try to protect themselves from his lashing reactivity.

Clergypersons finding themselves to be less reactive to all different kinds of situations was one of the strongest findings of the entire study. They were not only aware of it themselves but also had family members and work associates commenting on the change—and appreciating it!

In the last few exchanges on the phone with his daughter, Christy, I am attempting to show what clergy described as being More Understanding. When clergy described this outcome in their attitudes and practices with others, it often included a story of someone they really cared about who had expressed experiencing the clergyperson as being more understanding. In many of these cases, the clergyperson was surprised because they were not really aware that they had not been understanding until someone commented about how much more understanding they seemed to be.

After Greg’s fake “blow-up” at his daughter, he begins choosing his words carefully to tell her how he really feels about the bellybutton ring. He is described as actually feeling calm inside. This is the second place in the story where there is a small reference to the theme of More Calm. This theme will come out even stronger in the next story, which is about “Pam,” but it is present here in Greg’s Story because several respondents spoke of it as somewhat of a side benefit to being Less Reactive, and yet it was still a distinct change they chose to describe separately. Greg’s Story intends to represent those where that theme was more subtle.
Greg’s Story ends with another representation of the Overall Value that he found in having learned and applied Family Systems Theory to both his personal and professional life.

Pam’s Story: The Return of Calm

Ring-Ring! Ring-Ring!

Pam calmly but quickly reached for her cell phone and switched it to “silent.” Then she slipped it out of its holster and looked down to see what her Caller ID would show. There on the screen was a small picture of Dr. Schultz along with his contact information. “Leon Schultz – (502) 555-1623” the ID read as the phone vibrated in her hand. She smiled to herself as she pressed her finger on the “Ignore” button on the screen and slipped the phone back into its holster.

“Margaret, would you have prayer for us before we start the meeting, please?”

“Sure, Pam. Let’s bow our heads everyone. Dear Father in heaven, we praise You this morning for Your graciousness toward us. We are thankful for how You have blessed us with the responsibilities of ministry that we each have here. Please help us to minister and lead with integrity today, and . . .”

As Margaret prayed, Pam’s mind wandered from the prayer circle of the Presbytery administrators and staff around her. She could not help noticing how calm she felt—especially knowing that even now Dr. Schultz was probably leaving her a “very important” message in an agitated “you’d-better-pay-attention-to-this-blazing-crisis” tone of voice. Pam knew that in a few minutes her phone would vibrate again, notifying her of a new voice mail having been left—by Dr. Schultz.
“Why did I smile as I pushed the ‘Ignore’ button?” Pam wondered to herself. It almost made her chuckle out loud as she thought about it. There was some kind of feeling that went along with that smile that felt really good to her right now. It was satisfying. She contemplated her motives for a minute: “Was I wanting to ‘show him’ in a feisty way?” “No, I don’t think so,” she thought. “No. It wasn’t a smirk like, ‘Ha! Take that you old troublemaker!’” It was really just a satisfaction that I wasn’t reacting like I always used to.”

The satisfaction was a sense of being in control of her life—but it wasn’t the dysfunctional sense of being in control of someone else. She was using appropriate boundaries to be in control of herself. She was taking stewardship responsibility for her own life and time and her calling in ministry. And that felt really good! No wonder she felt more calm! She remembered how—not that long ago—she would get really agitated whenever she saw she was getting a call from this doctor who was the session president of one of the churches in her Presbytery.

Just then she heard the faint buzz of the phone vibrating the notice that a voice mail had just been left. “Wow, that was a pretty long message,” she thought. “I remember how even that little buzz would really irritate me. I would get all nervous inside wondering what the issue was going to be this time and how I would respond.”

There had been many times over the past 2 years when she had wanted to hang up on him in the middle of a conversation. He seemed to be so good at pushing her buttons and getting her all worked up inside and at the same time kind of frozen to where she felt she could not speak or explain herself. Then she would feel dumb, ignorant, and inadequate. She would agonize about the phone calls afterwards as she calmed down and
started to think about what she should have said. It was like her ability to think started coming back to her only gradually after one of those conversations. It made her so angry that she could not seem to control the anxiety that would consume and control her when she talked with him. But today she could see that it really was different.

“I’m really thankful for that little smile,” she thought. “It’s a small sign to me that I really have made progress with all the family-of-origin work that I’ve been doing. I’m really grateful I got started on that with the program at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. It was that Peter Steinke conference on *How Your Church Family Works* that really opened my eyes to how I needed something that would help me understand how I got into these messes, and more importantly, that it was possible to learn how to get out of them and not be sucked back in . . .”

Her mind wandered back to the feeling of being “sucked in.” She remembered how others had felt “sucked in” to her own angst, too. Margaret had even tried to talk to her about it—probably on behalf of others in the office too. “But it was so frustrating!” she thought. “It was like I knew there was something right about what Margaret was saying, but I couldn’t figure it out. And since I couldn’t figure it out, I didn’t want to take any responsibility for it. I told her not to try to blame her ‘emotional issues’ on me. She could deal with her own feelings! Of course, now that I understand how emotional systems ‘pass anxiety around,’ I realize that when I got anxious and upset by Dr. Schultz I had my little unconscious ways of making things miserable for everyone else in the office. I would say things that kind of passed the worry on—and in such a way that someone else would feel that they had to be at least partly to blame for it too! Pretty soon we were all on edge—and yes, everyone played into it in their own unique ways—kind of
like the cows Roberta Gilbert talks about. She says when one gets too close to the
electric fence and gets shocked, ‘she may jump, vocalize and even jump or run, showing
that she is in a very anxious state.’ That was me! ‘How long does it take for the other
cows in the pasture to “catch” the anxiety? It happens almost immediately’ (Gilbert,
2006, p. 6). She was so right! And I was often that ‘shocked cow.’”

Pam thought about how that “sucked-in” feeling was a perfect example of the
natural homeostasis every system has. Everyone in the system tends to function in the
“perfect” way to keep the system doing what it has always done. It is very difficult to
change. “Even when a person in a system is replaced,” she remembered, “the ‘new’
person feels the unconscious pressure to act in such a way as to keep the system
functioning the same way.” She remembered feeling that pressure when she first came
into this position.

“Well, that first seminar did give me a ray of hope,” she mused. “When I realized
that this stuff could actually be understood and explained—sometimes even charted
out—then I realized there might be hope in improving the situation. That ray of hope is
what led me to join that next year’s monthly program for working clergy who wanted to
study the topic further and present and discuss real case studies of their own ministry
situations. It’s pretty amazing, thinking back. That was really what started a complete
change in direction for me.”

Pam, who was now the General Presbyter of her region’s Presbytery, came out of
her deep thought enough to notice that Margaret was now praying for each of the
congregations that were currently going through the “Healthy Congregations” training.
“Wow! That’s quite interesting!” she thought. “I’m sitting here musing over how different my response is to a phone call from Dr. Schultz, and I know it is because of the growth I’ve made after my training in Family Systems Theory, and Margaret is praying for the congregations that are going through that very training. Of course that wouldn’t be happening if I hadn’t gotten the help I so desperately needed from this way of understanding systems.”

“Amen!” Pam heard herself say quite emphatically! “Ooops! I think I may have overemphasized that a little, but I really do want those churches to open up to the training and find the real value in it,” she thought to herself.

It was really great for Pam to realize that her paying attention to her own needs for growth had enabled her to not only react differently in ministry leadership situations every day, but it had also made it possible for her to be aware of, and arrange for, training for local clergy and congregations to help them develop healthier systems in their congregations. It seemed that the growth she had made personally had come “just in time” to help her really be prepared for the administrative position she had been offered. It certainly was not anything she had been expecting—or even wanting. But somehow God had arranged it and given her the opportunity to be prepared for it.

Pam knew there would be more challenges ahead, but at least she felt she had a framework for understanding the interactions between people in these stressful situations, and she had some tools to help her manage herself and mentor others too.

“. . . in Thy Holy Name, Amen.”

“Whoa! I guess I’d better pay attention now,” Pam thought.
“Thanks for your prayer, Margaret,” Pam said. “You all should have received your agendas by email. Does anyone need another copy as we get started?”

After the meeting Pam gathered up her papers and put them in her briefcase. It had been a good meeting. They had grappled with some difficult issues, but it seemed that everyone worked together to contribute to finding solutions. They were dealing with the two most recent pastor-congregation conflicts in which pastors were having to leave their congregations. This made five such cases (out of 56 pastors) in just the last year and a half. The meeting had been serious, but people seemed to have a general comfort with each other and genuine listening to the various perspectives. It was all going to get worked through.

“Thanks, Margaret. Thanks, Geneva. Bye, Mark. I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” Pam smiled and nodded at some of the others on the team as everyone was dispersing, and she headed for the door. She pushed the down button for the elevator and stared at the lighted button as she reviewed the meeting in her mind. It was such a different feeling than so many other times she remembered. “I can’t wait to tell Barb, Liz, Mark, and Kevin,” she thought as she reflected on what had changed. “We decided last time we were going to do some reflecting this time, and I think my reflections are starting to come together.”

The elevator dinged and the doors opened. She walked in and leaned against the back wall of the elevator. Her thinking went deeper as the elevator descended to the parking levels of the office building. Her body was on autopilot as she left the elevator and walked toward her car. The sound of her car’s alarm system beeping its unlock tone when she pressed the remote button on her keychain hardly even entered her
consciousness. She was reviewing all the things she could reflect on from the last few years. All different scenes and conversations flooded through her mind. Even though at some level she knew she was driving out of the parking garage, waiting at a stoplight, and then getting on the ramp to the interstate, she hardly noticed.

There was that time she stood in her kitchen and listened to her husband and daughter getting into a huge argument and she consciously chose not to enter in. Finally, Jody had said, “Mom, are you all right? Are you going to say anything?” Jody was accustomed to her mom taking her side and getting rather heated to ‘tip the scales.’ “That was the first time I realized I was choosing not to ‘triangle in,’” she said half out loud. Both her daughter and her husband had been surprised when she did not jump into the middle of it. “I calmly gave a few thoughts and said they were going to have to work it out. And I left the room! That was awesome!”

Pam remembered when she had started drawing her family genogram and how she was starting to see things she had not really thought about but that really made sense even as she tried to draw it out. She had been really scared to share it with the small group at class. But she could still see the gentle look on Barb’s face when she reached out to take Pam’s hands and said, “I like your family. You should see mine!”

As other highlights flashed through Pam’s mind, she wondered out loud, “How am I going to summarize all this stuff to the group?” She was really enjoying the monthly accountability/study group that she had formed with four other clergy from different denominations. Barb, Liz, Mark, and Kevin had all taken some training in Family Systems Theory applied to clergy and congregations, too. Barb and Kevin had been in the first class Pam had taken. They had learned from each other and shared a lot
of their process of growth. Liz and Mark had gone through a different training, but all five of them wanted more accountability to put into practice the things they had learned. “Understanding is just the first part of it,” Kevin would always say. “I want to get on with the second part—changing something!” Pam whole-heartedly agreed, and that is why she had worked hard to keep this monthly group in her busy schedule. “So, how am I going to summarize this ‘reflecting’ that I’ve been doing?”

“I think I’m less blaming. I think that’s really what Margaret was saying when she said I seemed to be ‘more grace-filled.’ She knows that I have tended to hold grudges for little things for a long time. I know she has felt my forgiving attitude coming through more readily in the last couple of years. It is starting to replace my strong tendency to blame others for my mess-ups. I’m glad she’s noticed that, and I’m glad for her. I’m not sure how she put up with me for so long!”

“What else?” Pam tried to think of how she would summarize her experience to her friends. “I know I’m much better at responding instead of reacting. I definitely have more confidence!” It seemed like there were so many different things, and yet they all seemed related somehow. Pam realized that probably everything could be summed up by saying that she was “More Self-Differentiated.” That was, according to the theory, really what was happening for her. But it just seemed so sterile to say it that way. How could she describe all her reflections of her stormy life before and how much better everything was now? “Maybe I’ll have to draw them a picture,” she said out loud, “a ‘before-and-after’ picture!”

“Knock, knock!” Pam jumped! She turned to look out her window. She was still sitting with her hands on the wheel looking straight ahead even though she had already
parked her car in the First Presbyterian parking lot right outside the office entrance. “Are you coming in? Or are you just going to sit there all day?” Barb asked through the window.

Pam turned the ignition off and opened her door. “Oh, I’m sorry. I guess I was just thinking. Yes, I’m coming in! How are you?”

“Just thinking?? I guess!! You’ve been sitting there for almost 5 minutes! Were you listening to the radio or something?” Barb asked.

“No, I was just thinking—no, I was ‘reflecting,’” Pam said with a smile. “I was just reflecting on all the things that have changed in my life since we met at the Steinke seminar in 1999. Do you realize it was that long ago?”

The ladies went on in to the office where they sat down with the others for their monthly meeting. Pam decided that as they each shared reflections on their personal learning and professional application of the principles of “Systems Thinking,” she was just going to write down a few sentences—or even just short phrases—that might somehow capture the impact that each had experienced so far. Here is some of what she wrote:

Mark: “The greatest learning for me was the genograms. I learned to look not just for where conflict had been but also where great love existed. I found that both have an impact on my leadership in any given situation today.”

Barb: “I could not be an effective leader without this.”

Liz: “How I operate either helps feed people’s anxiety or diffuses it. Now I step back a little more. I just calmly ask myself, ‘What’s going on here?’”
Kevin: “I have a much greater foundation of compassion.” Other phrases: “less sense of judgment,” “new lens into complexities,” and “the system perpetuates itself—unless someone changes.”

Pam: “I can’t imagine dealing with the topic of leadership (which all of our churches desperately need) without systems understandings.”

Barb: She talked a little about the history in her congregation (which we were all quite familiar with because of discussions we had had in previous meetings) when going over one of her case studies. Then she made this observation: “The family patterns perpetuate even though the people turn over.”

When Pam finished writing Barb’s comment, she realized it had suddenly gone quiet in the room. Everyone seemed to be deep in thought. Pam broke the silence: “Hey everyone! I had an idea when I was driving over here. I thought it would be cool if we used the whiteboard and everyone drew a picture of the impact of your family systems learning so far—you know, kind of a ‘before-and-after’ picture.”

“Oh, Pam, I think your creativity has gone just a little too far!” Kevin complained.

“I’m willing to give it a shot,” offered Mark. “In fact I’ve just been sitting here thinking about how lots of people in my life really have no idea how this has impacted me. It is like so much of what has happened for me is ‘beneath the surface.’ Do you guys know what I mean?” Pam looked around the group and saw puzzled faces. She did not exactly know what Mark meant either, but it intrigued her. Mark was probably the quietest one in the group. He was a deep thinker. Sometimes he did not say much for a long time, but when something did come out, the rest of the group was always struck by the depth of his thought. It had been hard for Mark to share anything personal. He
seemed to be a very private person. But in this group he had come to feel safe enough that he had shared a lot of challenging things he had been facing in his congregation. Over time he had risked more to share some of his internal struggles triggered by the congregational challenges. He had told them how much he valued the time they spent together each month, and he would go to great lengths not to miss a meeting.

Pam moved a little so she could see. Mark already had a stick man drawn on the whiteboard (Figure 5). He drew a horizontal brown line just below the smiling face on the stick man. Barely under that he drew a blue wavy line like a water level right at the guy’s neck. Underneath this he was using the red marker to make all kinds of hash marks, squiggles, and stars.

“See, in my life, what most people see is only this!” Mark pointed to the smiling face above the brown line. “What they don’t realize is all the stuff going on ‘under the surface.’” Pointing to the red hash marks he vigorously added some more. “They don’t realize how far up the water level is. They don’t know that I feel like I might be about ready to drown! Sometimes even people close to me don’t know! As you guys know, I’m not very good about feeling ‘Okay’ or ‘right’ about sharing hard stuff like that.”

The group was amazed at Mark’s animation as he went on. He very quickly drew a long vertical line down the middle of the board. He seemed to be racing to get the picture drawn. “This is me, now! This is the ‘after’ drawing,” he said as he started drawing an identical stick man on the other side of the board. He put in the same brown line right under the face. Then he started drawing a blue wavy ‘water line’ again, but this one was way down low.
Figure 5. Mark’s drawing showing what people see and what they do not see.
“What has changed for me,” Mark explained, “is that all this stuff that was almost ready to overwhelm me and drown me has gone way down.” He drew a few red squiggles under the water line by the guy’s feet. “There’s still stuff down here. It isn’t all gone away. But I don’t have near the anxiety that I was getting back here!” He exclaimed as he pointed back to the first stick man.

“Wow, that’s really cool!” Liz said in a slow, quiet whisper. “That’s what it was like for you when we started this whole thing, huh?”

The speed of Mark’s explanation slowed just a little as he glanced at Liz and said a soft, “Yeah.” Then he turned back to the board and continued by adding some faint marks in pink. The marks were in the space between the water line and the brown line. “These things that used to be pressing so hard up at me aren’t totally gone,” he explained, “but they’re so much reduced that they don’t cause the pains in my gut and the tightness in my chest that I used to feel almost all the time.”

Now for a moment it was silent. Mark glanced around the faces in the group and seemed a little self-conscious for all that he had just revealed. He turned back to the whiteboard as if to escape the spotlight. He wrote “Before” and “After” on the two sides. The he started adding the explanations of “what people see” above the brown lines and “what people don’t see” below the brown lines.

“Mark, that is awesome!” Kevin said. “That picture is worth a thousand words for me to really ‘get’ what this has all been like for you.”

“So grappling with your genogram and trying to apply all this stuff about triangles, and self-differentiation, and reactivity, and Bowen, and Friedman, and Steinke, and all that—has done this for you?” Barb asked, pointing to his picture.
“Yeah,” Mark said, still staring at his own picture. After a long pause he said, “I probably couldn’t have put it in words for you.” He sat back down in the small circle of chairs around the whiteboard. “If I just put words to it I don’t think it would tell the whole story. I could say, ‘I feel so much more calm.’ Or, ‘I feel less anxious.’ But this picture? *This is what I really mean.*”

Pam realized that this picture idea was proving to be far more significant than she had thought it would be. Suddenly, the picture she had in her mind seemed too simple and childish compared to Mark’s. But partly for her own expression, and partly to help others feel comfortable, she decided to go ahead with it.

“Thanks so much, Mark. That was awesome! Do you mind if I snap a picture of it on my phone for you? Then I can erase it, and the rest of us can do our pictures.”

“Yeah, I’d like a picture of it,” Mark said.

In a few minutes Pam was drawing her picture (Figure 6). In the first picture she was small—a stick person with a skirt and curly hair—under a stormy sky with rain clouds and lightning. In her “after” picture she was much larger, and the sun was shining. She finished her drawing saying, “There is still a cloud in the sky. Not everything is perfect. But it is a whole lot better for me.”

One by one, they each drew their pictures and explained what they were trying to portray to the group.

Kevin tried to explain how before the systems learning in his life he often felt like he was all alone pulling against everyone else (Figure 7). It was a feeling of being overwhelmed. After understanding how systems work and why people do the things they
Figure 6. Pam’s drawing showing how much happier she is after the training.
Figure 7. Kevin’s drawing.
do, he said it felt more like there was a circle of people, and while everyone had something they were pulling on, it was much more equal and fair.

Liz drew a picture that looked like a bunch of scribbles all over her stick figure of herself (Figure 8). She said it was chaos and entanglement in systems that she did not understand at all. It represented lots of fear and confusion for her. Her “after” picture represented a circle of people in which she described a much more open, balanced, and evenly organized picture. Her awareness of systems reduced her fear that had come with the chaos before.

Barb got up to draw her picture and said, “I don’t know how to draw this. It isn’t really going to be a picture at all. I guess it is more of a graph.” She started drawing some wavy lines (Figure 9). Then she drew a vertical line, and after the vertical lines the wavy lines kept going, but they got bigger and taller. She drew these lines in green and blues and described that each color was a different kind of awareness. “My awareness just keeps growing,” she said. “My awareness of systems, my awareness of my role in systems, and my awareness of myself and how I act in my own family all keeps growing. Sometimes I wish I wasn’t aware of so much! But on the other hand, I could never change or improve in these areas if I didn’t first have the awareness.”

After the meeting and everyone’s good-byes, Pam walked out to her car feeling very grateful. Even though there were still plenty of things to worry about, plenty of challenges ahead, and difficulties to face, she knew that internally there had been a return of calm.
Figure 8. Liz’s drawing.
Figure 9. Barb’s drawing.
Themes in Pam’s Story

Pam’s Story incorporates many themes from this study’s data. The themes discussed below are Overall Value, More Aware of Systems, More Aware of Self, Less Reactive, Less Anxious, Less Entangled, Less Blaming, and More Calm.

The goal in Pam’s Story was to provide a rich, thick description that would flow with as much realism as possible and still include the themes that needed to be described from the data. So the themes do not come in a nice neat orderly package. They are mixed throughout the story.

Overall Value is seen in all of Pam’s musings to herself about how much better she likes the way she is handling things now versus how she used to. Overall Value also shows up in her group meeting at the end of the story as the participants describe what they have gotten out of it. Their pictures, which are actual pictures drawn by respondents in the study, also give the sense of the value each person had found in getting the Family Systems training.

More Aware of Systems is portrayed in this story through Pam’s description of how systems have the property of homeostasis—a resistance to changing how the system works. She describes that as a “sucked-in” feeling and admits that she felt that when she first took on the new position. Barb also has the same awareness, which she describes by saying, “The family patterns perpetuate even though the people turn over.” Pam shows by her behavior that this awareness has helped her change her behavior as well; she is now much Less Entangled in that system.

Pam’s systems awareness also includes her appreciation for a “framework” of understanding from systems theory, and her knowledge of the triangulation that always
used to happen between her husband, her daughter, and herself. She demonstrates not only the awareness of the system dynamic of triangulation, but she also reveals being *More Aware of Self* in that situation where she was able to choose an action different from her usual one.

Through her processing of the ignored phone call from Dr. Schultz, the reader should clearly see the changed attitudes and practices Pam displays by being *More Calm*, *Less Reactive*, and *Less Anxious* in her relationship to Dr. Schultz.

When Pam thinks back through how frustrating it was when she did not understand the dynamics going on in the office, she describes her behaviors that tended to cast blame on others in the office. As she reviews how it used to be, the reader should realize that she is now *Less Blaming* in her office relationships. Even Margaret’s positive feedback saying she seems “more grace-filled” seems to support this too.

As the story wraps up, the reader hears from others in her small group that they have each been experiencing similar changes in their attitudes and practices and that what Pam finds herself most grateful for is the “return of calm.”

**Conclusion**

Each of these alternative representations attempts to show the real-life results of the LPTS Clergy Family Systems Program. The experiences of the clergypersons in these stories together represent the experiences of 12 of the 14 clergypersons in this study. The other two will be described as disconfirming data in chapter 5. The theme of *Understanding and Relevance* shows that the clergy understood enough of the theory to apply it and that they believed in its relevance enough to put it into practice. Their being *More Aware of Systems* and *More Aware of Self* gave them the starting point to be able to
make changes. They all made strong statements of appreciating the Overall Value that the systems learning process had not only in their personal lives, but also in their ministry roles.

The specific ways that the understanding and application of these concepts changed them included that they were Less Reactive, Less Anxious, Less Entangled, Less Taking Things Personally, Less Blaming, More Understanding, More Calm, and More Calming. These themes found in the preceding stories are examined in greater detail in chapter 5.
CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS

Introduction

The major findings of this study are summarized below, organized by these four groupings: Understanding and Relevance, Overall Value, Awareness, and Attitudes and Practices.

Understanding and Relevance

Since this study’s research question asked what difference the understanding and application of Family Systems Theory made to the leadership attitudes and practices of the clergypersons in the study, it is important to start a description of findings with a confirmation that the participants understood the theory. The reason perceived relevance is important is because it so directly impacts whether a person will apply the theory in their actual practice. My observation is that the more participants believed that the concepts were relevant, the more they took the effort to make application in their ministries.

This theme is treated in a separate grouping because it is more of a prerequisite to the rest of the themes. If there is little or no understanding or sense of relevance, then the rest of the findings would be invalidated. So this theme stands by itself.

All 14 clergypersons reported high levels of understanding of the concepts presented in the family systems educational program at Louisville Presbyterian
Theological Seminary (LPTS). In the interviews, respondents demonstrated their understanding further by how they frequently referred to various parts of the theory as they answered other questions.

Respondents were also asked to rate how relevant they felt the concepts of the training were to their personal lives and to their ministries. Only 2 out of the 14 respondents rated the relevance fairly low (2 to 3 on a scale of 5). The rest rated it very high (almost all 5’s). The 2 who reported less relevance also reported much fewer changes in their leadership attitudes and practices. Again, those who believed it to be relevant to their personal and professional lives seemed to make much more application and described more positive results in their attitudes and practices.

As a group, the 14 clergypersons in the study understood the Family Systems Theory concepts well, and a vast majority believed it was very relevant to their families and their ministries. So the stage was set for assessing the results, the overall value, and the specific ways participating in this program benefitted the clergy and their leadership.

**Overall Value**

*Overall Value* was the most striking theme emerging from the data. It is what Eisner (1998) would call the “dominant feature of the situation” or a “pervasive quality” (p. 104). The *Overall Value* theme answers the question, “Did participation in the LPTS program make a positive difference in the lives of the participating clergy?” The answer from the clergy is a resounding “Yes!”

This theme is in a separate grouping all by itself because it is at a different level of abstraction. It is not a particular attitude or practice applied to ministry. Instead it gives a general, overall result for the study. The research question asks, “In what
ways . . .” did it make a difference? That question drives a search for the particular attitudes and practices that changed. However, before pressing on to the specifics, it is worth noting that even without the particulars, respondents are very clear that this program had tremendous value to them. This sense of Overall Value is so striking to them that it takes on a role of a foundational attitude and lends credibility to the other themes. The altered attitudes and practices examined later in this study are strengthened by the clergypersons’ strong confidence that the overall theory is valid and worth applying—not only in ministry but also in the clergyperson’s personal family life.

The Overall Value these clergypersons found in participating in the LPTS program on clergy family systems is best expressed in their own words:

“...I think this one has had the deepest impact and certainly has stayed with me the longest. . . . It opened up for me a whole new way of looking at things. Not that I hadn’t sort of known that there were these forces and one thing or another, but I think it gave me the tools to...
really begin to grapple with and explore and explain and then to figure out how I respond
to these sorts of things.”

Participant drawings also express the Overall Value. Participants were asked to
draw a picture describing how things were for them before the program and then after it
was over. They were to use any means they wished to describe the “before” and “after”
of their experience.

Greg drew a picture (Figure 10) in which he described the large red markings in
the sky as the “sense of anger, turmoil, and discontent” he had before the program,
contrast with a very small amount of “calm, joy, and ‘it’s all okay.”” Then his “after”

![Before](image1.png) ![After](image2.png)

*Figure 10.* Greg’s drawing showing increased calm, joy, and “it’s all okay.”
picture had “a whole lot more of calm, joy and ‘it’s all okay’ with just a little bit of discontent still there.”

Dave’s picture (Figure 11) shows a great Overall Value contrast. He described himself in the “before” picture as “cowering under” and said, “I’ve put it in red because I realize so much of my life—my main way of responding—was out of my anger.” When he described the “after” picture he used words like “fun,” “more complete,” and “happy.” He summed it up by saying, “I’m a more colorful person.” Still looking at the picture, Dave said, “Family systems has changed my life. It really has. . . . I’m convinced that God used family systems to help turn the light bulb on for me.”

This theme, affirming a high degree of Overall Value of Family Systems Theory applied to congregational life and leadership, was found strongly in 12 out of the 14 clergypersons interviewed.

Awareness

The third grouping of this study’s findings has two themes: More Aware of Systems and More Aware of Self. This grouping is not the “main event” of this study, because it is not directly about changed attitudes and practices. It is, however, an important prerequisite. The research question asked, “In what ways have clergy persons who understood and personally applied concepts learned in Clergy Family Systems training programs experienced positive changes in their leadership attitudes and practices?” Change is what is sought in the responses. Change that requires significant personal effort to achieve rarely occurs without a significant awareness first.
Figure 11. Dave’s before-and-after drawing showing an “angry, cowering under” person before and a more fun, complete, and colorful person after the program.
Some respondents actually described their awareness as a changed attitude. They spoke of their “willingness to be aware” as an attitude that was necessary to take any further steps. It was contrasted with the attitude that might be expressed like this: “Don’t tell me any new information or I might have to change something.” The majority of respondents, however, simply saw their being more aware as a “necessary first step” before being able to make changes.

The awarenesses emerging from the data fell into the two broad categories that form the themes mentioned above, More Aware of Systems and More Aware of Self. Either of these could have been broken down into smaller sub-categories. However, since these are still “prerequisite” themes and not the themes that directly answer our research question, they are left broad and will be treated more lightly than the attitudes and practices covered in the section that follows these awareness sections.

More Aware of Systems

This awareness is different from a simple intellectual understanding of Family Systems Theory. This is an awareness that recognizes the concepts of systems as they play out in the real world. Clergypersons reported becoming aware, while in conversation with a parishioner, of a theoretical pattern playing itself out right then and there. They spoke of many ways that their awareness of systems helped them be more understanding, calmer, or less blaming of others. They also spoke of their awareness of the “big picture,” helping them to consciously choose their responses rather than reacting out of old habits.

Respondents being More Aware of Systems covered a wide range of aspects of systems. More than anything else they spoke of a general awareness of systems, which
they sometimes called the “Big Picture” or “Framework” of Family Systems Theory. They also explained being more aware of specific aspects of Systems Theory, such as the concept of an emotional system, homeostasis, self-differentiation, overfunctioning and underfunctioning, and triangulation.

When respondents spoke of the “Big Picture,” they were describing the general understanding of Bowen Theory that everyone comes from a family with certain patterns of functioning and ways of maintaining equilibrium. They also understood that each individual, even when in a new system, tends to function according to their familiar patterns from their family of origin. Some described this awareness of the “Big Picture” as something that “had always been there, but I never really saw before.” Another respondent said, “It really has become part of my constant awareness as I approach lots of different things. It has had a huge impact!”

This awareness of the “Big Picture” tended to cause an attitude shift. “I step back a little more and ask myself, ‘What’s going on here?’” Another described it as “a broader lens to see things through.” She said, “It allows me to think preventatively and systemically too—‘If we do this, what is that going to cause in the system?’” Another clergyperson described it along with his drawing (Figure 12) as “a new lens into complexity . . . which provides a greater foundation of compassion.” He believed that understanding the complexities of someone else’s life, and how intricately woven into difficult systems they were, helped him be more gracious and compassionate with those people.
Figure 12. John’s drawing showing the “new lens into complexity,” which provides a “greater foundation of compassion.”
Closely related to the “Big Picture” is the concept of the “emotional system.” When Bowen (M. E. Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 27) and others (Gilbert, 2006) describe the eight basic concepts of this theory, they usually begin with the emotional system because it is so basic to the rest of the theory. Several respondents referred to Roberta Gilbert’s (2006) memorable image of her grandfather’s cattle all startling and running when just one of them bumps the electric fence (p. 6).

Being more aware of this can be very helpful. One clergyman observed,

Being aware that I’m dealing with an emotional system means I’m not always saying to myself, ‘Why did he do that? That doesn’t make any sense!’ No, it doesn’t make sense if you are expecting everybody’s actions to be rational and logical. But since you know it is an emotional system you don’t hang onto an expectation of pure rationality.

The “Differentiation of Self Scale” describes another major component of Bowen’s Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978) of which respondents were more aware. Self-differentiation itself is rather an abstract concept that can be difficult to understand, and even Bowen said it is impossible to measure. He describes it as “an effort to classify all levels of human functioning, from the lowest possible levels to the highest potential level on a single dimension” (Bowen, 1978, p. 472). So how did clergy in this study become more aware of it? While it was studied in depth in the training, the aspects that were referred back to by the clergy revolved around two forces of the scale of self-differentiation. Every human experiences these forces—the togetherness force and the individuality force. Both togetherness and separateness are needed to function well. What happens to most people is that they fall in one ditch or the other. They either cut almost completely off from relationships so they can be their own individual, or they so fuse with others to avoid losing the togetherness that they can only act out of their anxiety.
about losing the relationship—they cannot act on their own or out of their own thoughts and feelings. Both extremes are easily observed once a person is aware of the concept.

Respondents spoke most of being aware of that struggle to individuate out of the pull of the system’s fusion. Sometimes they referred to it as being “hooked in” to the anxiety of others. One, speaking of the anxiety, said, “If you can maintain the self-differentiation and not be hooked by it, then that really diffuses a lot of other people’s anxiety.” Some did not use the term but spoke of the concept of the need “to work with staying connected and yet being able to individuate for myself.” Being aware of this need for individuation or differentiation is an important first step toward making the changes in attitudes and practices that clergypersons desire in their leadership.

Another aspect of Systems Theory closely associated with the big picture, the emotional system, and the concept of self-differentiation is the idea of homeostasis. Respondents sometimes revealed their awareness of systems by referring to the system’s homeostasis being the force that kept people stuck in the system’s old ways. One said that the most significant concept he learned was the concept of homeostasis. He described how he had gained “a lot more respect” for how it operates in a congregation:

When I go to a new church as the pastor, I have to recognize that there is a system there. That system in many cases has been operating more than 100 years! In fact, in the congregation I was in at that time, probably about 130 years! That is a lot of homeostasis! And just by stepping in the front door as the new pastor I am walking into a very strong “force field” if you will, that is going to try to shape me to fit the mold that the system—the church—has been putting on that role for a very long time!

This respondent also described an awareness of what it takes to be able to lead effectively in such a difficult entry situation:

It takes a very strong sense of self-differentiation and good measure of God’s grace for a person to stand, move, breathe, walk, lead through such a field without caving into it. . . . For a pastor to just be aware of the power of that homeostasis, and how it
is likely to act on you, before going into a new congregation can be very helpful. And the interesting thing is that while that “force field” would be the same for any pastor that would come in, it is going to “bounce” differently depending on the pastor’s own makeup and “triggers.” So, knowing yourself and your own triggers is vital, and then having some God-given discernment to understand the system and the field you’re walking into, is also very helpful.

Being More Aware of Systems for many respondents included having an awareness of triangles. Understanding triangulation is a huge part of observing systems and making some sense out of them. Bowen (1978) says a relationship triangle is “a three-person emotional configuration which is the molecule or the basic building block of any emotional system, whether it is in the family or any other group” (p. 373). While triangles are everywhere and are not inherently good or bad, to understand the larger system it is crucial to be able to spot the “molecules” that build the system. The clergypersons in this study frequently spoke of being more aware of the triangles operating in the systems they worked with.

One respondent describing her total “before-and-after” experience drew an image showing how tangled and confusing all of these relationship dynamics were before she understood systems theory (Figure 13). The “after” picture showed a bunch of interlocking triangles. She said, “They’re all still interlocking, but at least you can see definition in them, so if you wanted to separate something out and look at it, you could.” Being aware of triangles shows a systems understanding that makes future change much more likely.

All of the various ways respondents have described how they are More Aware of Systems mean that change is more likely to take place. One has to know what is broken before one can fix it. It is important to diagnose a disease before a person knows how to
Figure 13. Laura’s drawing showing confusion vs. interlocking triangles.

treat it. Awareness of systems is one level of diagnosing. The next level, in order to really see positive change, is being *More Aware of Self*.

**More Aware of Self**

Awareness of systems *can* still be somewhat of an academic or intellectual exercise. It is an awareness of different ways of viewing what is going on “out there.” For a person to be *More Aware of Self*, it becomes a very *personal* exercise. It takes a fair amount of self-confidence, self-esteem, or self-differentiation to be aware of self. It can be uncomfortable. It is so easy to deny how the issues show up in yourself. It is not
difficult to “pass the buck.” Blaming others has been a part of human nature ever since Adam had fresh apple juice running down his chin.

Awareness of systems seems to come first. As a person understands how systems work, they typically first see it playing out in other people around them. Over time they begin to see and feel it playing out in themselves. One respondent said, “I can clearly see now that I was pretty unaware of some of the issues in my own family. They gradually dawnsed on me over time [in the program].”

While it can be helpful to be more aware of systems in general, an awareness of self is even more powerful for change. The changes in attitudes and practices that will be discussed in the next section are possible largely because of four factors just discussed: (a) an understanding of Family Systems Theory, (b) a sense of the relevance of this theory to the clergyperson’s personal and professional issues, and therefore reason to apply it, (c) awareness of systems issues as they are seen in real-time in real-life situations, and (d) awareness of self—awareness of one’s own anxieties, reactions, attitudes, habits, and patterns of relating in the context of these systems dynamics.

**Attitudes and Practices**

Altered leadership attitudes and practices are the heart of what this study has pursued. So far in this chapter a high level of understanding of Family Systems concepts has been demonstrated. There is an even higher belief that the concepts are relevant to the clergypersons’ personal lives and ministries. Over 85% are making rather dramatic statements of the Overall Value of the training process they went through. They are more aware of the concepts at work in real-life situations around them. Participants are more aware of their own personal attitudes and behaviors in the context of systems dynamics.
Now, the bottom-line question is, Did the understanding and application of these concepts make a difference in their leadership attitudes and practices at home and in their places of ministry? It definitely made a positive difference. The findings that follow demonstrate the ways.

The findings in this grouping are organized according to these themes: Less Reactive, Less Anxious, Less Entangled, Less Taking Things Personally, Less Blaming, More Understanding, More Calm, and More Calming. In each of these themes the concepts of attitude and practice are addressed. Most of these themes emerged representing both a change in attitude as well as a change in practice; exceptions are noted where they occur.

Less Reactive

A decrease in reactivity was the dominant or most recurring theme among all changes in attitudes and practices. A few respondents described this decrease in reactivity as just another way of describing the increased calm they felt. However, enough of them clearly identified “calm” separately that More Calm is treated as a distinct theme. I could take Less Anxious or Less Entangled and assume that these mean the same thing as More Calm also, but that would be taking too much liberty to read into the data. I have worked hard to let the themes—including how they are named—truly emerge from the data. More Calm emerges from the data as a different theme from Less Reactive, Less Anxious, and Less Entangled and will be discussed on its own merits below.

Less Reactive shows up first as a change in leadership practice. Some describe it as a chosen change, while others portray it simply as a result of changes in their overall
understanding and attitudes toward what goes on in the congregational system. One says, “I have made a real effort to become less reactive.” Another says, “A very important learning for me is how to respond instead of react.” “So we’ve made a conscious effort to try to do things not in reactive states but in creative states.”

Another connected her lowered reactivity with her increased understanding. “I think it has enabled me to be less reactive and more—I don’t know if proactive is always the right word—but at least not just kind of being buffeted by these things but to have an understanding of what’s going on.”

Some realistically acknowledged that they were seeing more results of being Less Reactive in some settings than others.

On a personal level it was helping me understand my own reactivity and how we function differently in different systems. In other words, in my family I react. My reactivity is much higher at home than in other situations. Whereas I am now able to pretty much be a calm presence in the Presbytery and in congregations.

Another said, “It really is more of an effort for me. I really have to be intentional in the family to not be reactive because so much of who I am is wrapped into my family.” Yet another admits that “certainly at home my entire life is spent trying not to be reactive. It’s just a constant lab experiment.”

Others found that the greatest improvement in their reactivity actually came at home. “It has made a difference for me. It’s made me a better husband and a better father, to be able to see patterns develop and not be so reactive.”

Some respondents who experienced the change to being Less Reactive were able to identify the very part of systems work that helped change their reactivity: “I think for me it was family-of-origin work which helped me to be less reactive, more calm, take a neutral position in issues, be a better listener, and manage my own anxiety.”
Being *Less Reactive* can be both an attitude and a practice, and of all the changes in attitudes and practices this was the most often noted improvement.

**Less Anxious**

Anxiety is a key concept in Bowen Theory. It is used as a general term for emotions—which are automatic physiologic reactions. “It is usually not necessary,” says Roberta Gilbert (2006), “to describe the coloration of the anxiety (depression, elation, anger, etc.). At base, most intense emotion is simply, and can be referred to as, anxiety” (pp. 6-7). In her brief book summarizing the eight concepts of Bowen Theory, the word “anxiety” has more entries in the index than any other word. Because it is so central to the theory, it has connections with, and sometimes seems to become completely intertwined with, every other concept in the theory. For example, when anxiety is rising, “we are anxious, we react, and we produce a symptom. We become more anxious because of the presence of the symptom. The dance goes on” (Herrington et al., 2003, p. 58). In defining a theme of *Less Anxious*, it could be possible to label any positive outcome in this study—having fewer symptoms—as a result of someone being *Less Anxious*. For this reason I must describe more specifically what I mean with this theme.

First, I did not assign this theme if it only seemed to be implied by other changes in behavior. I did not assume that if someone described themself as *Less Reactive* that automatically meant they must also have been *Less Anxious*. I assigned this theme only when the words “anxious,” “anxiety,” or “worry” were actually used by the respondent. In addition, I recognized that anxiety is more of an internal phenomenon and kept it separate from the concept of reactivity.
While *Less Reactive* is more about the external response, *Less Anxious* is used to describe a reduction in a more general and mostly *internal* anxiety. An increase in anxiety often leads to more external reactions. Conversely, if a person can reduce their overall anxiety, it tends to reduce their external reactivity as well. However, when sorting through the data, if a particular piece of data was difficult to place, we placed data that reflected more of an *internal* response into *Less Anxious*, while the more *external* responses were put into *Less Reactive*.

One clergywoman described herself being surprised at how much less anxious she was when the issue that was coming up in a church meeting hit at a place where she had been quite sensitive. She said she would have expected herself to be internally all tied up in knots “because the issue of women in ministry is so intertwined with the theological perspective of this thing they were bringing.” Yet, “when he came before the council I don’t know how I did it without just coming totally unglued. . . . That was the first time I realized how much less anxiety I had.”

Others described lower “background levels” of anxiety, less “chronic anxiety,” and fewer physical symptoms of anxiety. One respondent described this theme as the “main significance” of having been in the program: “I find it very easy now . . . to be that non-anxious presence when I am in groups here in the church.”

Another respondent identified that his change in anxiety resulted from “tools” that he gained in the program. A few months after starting the program he received an “opportunity” to see how those tools worked:

We began our meetings as a class in the fall and that next February we had probably our biggest giver in the church pass away. I didn’t know it before his death. I only knew it following his death when our church treasurer said, “We are going to miss so and so. That was about 25% of our budget!” So coming into a system that was
already a little bit anxious about their income and out flow, that information I knew would be a key point of anxiety within the congregation. Being able to deal with it proactively as a systems issue was something that, I guess, if it had happened 6 months earlier I wouldn’t have had the tools.

One of those “tools” was described by a different clergyman when he said he felt his job was “basically educating them about conflict dynamics so that when they saw certain behaviors, they wouldn’t get anxious. They would recognize them and go, ‘Oh, Greg said this would happen.’”

“Unresolved anxieties from past relationships always find their expression in present relationships,” one clergyperson said. “I had a lot of unresolved emotional anxiety especially in my relationship with my dad. I’ve worked hard in re-establishing a relationship. . . . I think for me it was family-of-origin work which helped me to . . . manage my own anxiety.”

The theme Less Anxious is summed up well by this respondent:

I think the most important “noticing” that was done was the noticing that I had of myself. I don’t mean this in a self-centered way, but in the way that often it was the attitudes inside of me that were most important. Sometimes the outward difference in the immediate response at that time might not be extremely noteworthy to the casual observer, but I knew that my overall anxiety level or stress level was staying lower and not gradually mounting for some kind of an unhealthy release in some undeserving place or time.

Less Entangled

Understanding that emotional systems tend to “suck people in,” respondents in this study reported being grateful that after grappling with these Family Systems issues they were Less Entangled in the systems around and in which they lived and worked. A word commonly used in the literature to describe this entanglement is “fusion.” Fusion can be described between two people as “an anxious attachment carried to the extreme” (Guerin, 1996, p. 10). Guerin further describes it as “a symbiotic attachment and blurring
of boundaries between two people in which the transmission of anxiety is so intense that both people become convinced that they can’t survive without the other” (p. 10).

This study found that respondents were *Less Entangled* after the LPTS training. Participants explained that they were more able to act autonomously rather than being sucked into the entanglement (or fusion) of the system.

Liz visually described this entanglement in her “before” picture with lots of squiggly lines all around and over her stick figure of herself (Figure 14). Then in her “after” picture, she was still connected, but not entangled.

![Before and After Drawings](image)

*Figure 14.* Liz’s drawing showing the confusion of entanglement before understanding Family Systems Theory and greater understanding after.

The father-mother-daughter triangulation scenario in Pam’s Story in chapter 4 is another example of entanglement. Pam had found that the family systems work she had
been doing had begun to lessen her entanglement without her really realizing it until a particular scenario brought it to light.

One senior clergyman said,

The biggest difference for me is my ability to stay out of the middle of a conflict. I don’t feel like I have to defend the [organization] or take sides. I get less entangled with the issues that come up. I don’t get pulled into the emotional process—either on one side with the defensive role of the [organization] or on the other side just getting sucked into what the congregation was upset about.

Less Taking Things Personally

At first this theme may seem like it could be the same thing as Less Reactive. Taking things personally is a kind of reaction. However, after several iterations of the constant comparative method of analyzing the data, this theme kept standing out as an example of Merriam’s (1998) fourth guideline for determining the efficacy of categories:

Categories should be sensitizing. The naming of the category should be as sensitive as possible to what is in the data. An outsider should be able to read the categories and gain some sense of their nature. The more exacting in capturing the meaning of the phenomenon, the better. (p. 184)

Less Taking Things Personally may be an odd sounding name, but it is much more sensitive to the data than lumping it in with Less Reactive. The data reveal that sometimes a person may take something personally yet not give any outward reaction as a result. This theme name uses three words arising from the data to make it as “exacting in capturing the meaning” as possible. When I asked for feedback from “outsiders” on my theme names, none ever had any difficulty understanding the exact meaning of this one. I use the word “less” in the title of this theme because the research question is interested in what changed. Each of my attitudes and practices themes start with either “more” or “less,” which indicates a change on a continuum and the direction of that change. This also inherently denies the unrealistic idea of something like “reacting” or
“blaming” being totally eradicated, or “calm” being 100% true at all times. So this theme means simply that the respondent experienced Less of Taking Things Personally.

Less Taking Things Personally was a change in attitude and practice that was more often reported as an observation of others than a personal reflection—although both occurred.

My wife would be the first one to say that I no longer took things nearly as personal. Statements that were made I was willing to allow to be “water off the back” a little bit more, less concerned about pleasing everybody (which is an impossibility anyway).

It was not only spouses who made observations. Church council members noticed changes too:

After he walked out, several people on the council said, “We can’t believe you were able to do that without feeling so threatened by the whole thing!” And that was for me the first time I realized, “Wow! This stuff really works!—especially if you can hold back and realize this is not about me.”

“It is not about me” was a phrase that came up frequently in the data in segments related to this theme about not taking things personally. What I found was that it often indicated people who had been taking too much personal responsibility for things that were not theirs to take. So Less Taking Things Personally also demonstrated coming into better balance with personal responsibility. One respondent said, “Most of my life was lived as whenever there was a problem, my first instinct was to say, ‘It must be me. What have I done?’ This [training] has enabled me to say, ‘It may be me, but it may not be.’”

One clergyman told about the attitude change that had helped him the most:

The attitude that when things happen, I tend to step back a bit more and go, “What’s really going on here? It’s not about me. It’s not anything I did. It’s what’s happening in this person, or their home, or in the life of the church, or something like that, that’s really causing the behavior that I’m seeing or the attitude that’s being projected.”
Another explained how she became *More Aware of Self* regarding her own family-of-origin issues and how they pulled her into this over-responsible mode. She tells how her systems training helped her first to be aware of it, then to begin to change it:

I can think of a situation I’m dealing with my congregation right now. A family whose daughter has anorexia and she’s just come out of a month-long inpatient treatment center but has regressed a bit—which they’ve been told is normal. But they are lashing out at the church. I realized that my initial reaction to the woman was, what do I need to do to make this better for her? And then I was able to back off a bit and say, “That’s my stuff from the past. She may be expressing anger towards me, but it’s really not anger towards me, but her stuff, and if I can look at it that way then maybe I can find a place to minister to her that’s authentic without it being tied up with my role in my family before.”

People who learned to take things less personally found it kept them from reactions that might otherwise have overwhelmed the situation. When describing a very difficult situation in a church meeting, one respondent said, “Everything within me wanted to come unglued, but maybe that sense of self-differentiation and being able to discuss the issue without it becoming a personal thing, that it really didn’t have a lot to do about me personally, is what saved me.”

An “anxiety shock absorber” is how one leader described what he had come to be when his learning about systems helped him to take things less personally:

In church that was very important. . . . I wasn’t threatened as much, taking things personally, like “They don’t like me!” or this or that. I learned to be what I call an “anxiety shock absorber,” rather than taking things personally . . . taking all the responsibility for the relationships. I can back off and say, “This isn’t about me,” and at the same time stay connected.

**Less Blaming**

In an emotional system, anxiety travels. There are a number of ways that the anxiety can be passed from one person to another, but one of the more common is through blaming. If person “A” is feeling embarrassed by a big mistake he made that has
just been brought to light, then one way “A” can get off the “hot seat” is to pass the blame on to “B.” Obviously, this does not help to solve the problem, and the anxiety not only passes through the system but also increases in intensity. Now since “B” is blamed, he is on the “hot seat” and not only holds the original anxiety that “A” had, but also is angry (more anxiety in the system) at “A” for daring to blame him! This “blame game” tends to escalate anxiety as some agree with “A” and support the blame against “B,” while others feel sorry for “B” and get angry (more anxiety) with “A” for trying to pass the buck.

Understanding how destructive blaming can be, it is encouraging to find that the second theme of changing attitudes and practices among respondents is that they report being Less Blaming since participating in the LPTS training. Here is one respondent’s explanation:

The emphasis of family systems is . . . to ask myself, how am I functioning in this system? . . . What am I contributing to this system? And there are just all kinds of tentacles to what I’m trying to say, but one thing is I didn’t blame any more. “It’s their fault.” “It’s my wife’s fault.” “It’s the church.” “It’s so-and-so’s fault. They’re just not committed to the church. They only come every six weeks!” I’m not doing that any more! Rather I look at my role in that. There’s a new level of emotional maturity on my part. Rather than the blaming and projecting, I asked myself, what do I bring to this? I increased my boundaries—personal and professional boundaries.

When respondents described what brought them to a place of being Less Blaming, it almost always had to do with the “bigger picture” of a systems view of what was going on. One clergyperson said it this way:

Probably the main attitude change for me was one of responsibility versus blaming other things and people. I realized how easy it was without the system perspective to see various problems and think things like, “Why are these people so stubborn?” Or, “If they could just be more reasonable!” I easily thought my perspective was naturally right and these other people just weren’t thinking clearly. The attitude change for me was the ability to think, “What am I contributing to the situation (or
system) that is in some way contributing to their reaction? Sometimes I would say it was an unreasonable reaction, but even though it might really be unreasonable, it still would help to see what I contributed to the situation so that I could do something to make a difference, rather than just getting upset and blaming someone or something else.

More Understanding

Understanding is a word that showed up all throughout this study’s data. However, each time it appears, it must be analyzed for exactly what kind of understanding is meant in each context. There is the understanding specifically of the Bowen Theory and how it applies to clergy and congregations, which was discussed earlier in the “Understanding and Relevance” section of this chapter. Understanding in these interviews was also used to describe a practice or behavior of trying to understand something intellectually—listening carefully in order to understand a concept or an idea. The third meaning of understanding found in these data is the kind of understanding that describes an attitude one takes toward other people they interact with—an understanding attitude. This attitude is usually associated with words like caring, forgiving, and empathizing. This is the type of understanding that is meant by this theme of More Understanding.

One clergyman said very simply that learning and applying Family Systems Theory “helped me to be more understanding and patient with them.” Another leader trying to describe his understanding attitude said, “Probably the biggest change as a leader now, I seek to have my attitude shaped by them as much as to shape their attitudes.” Others described being “a better listener,” having “less sense of judgment,” and “a greater foundation for compassion.”
This compassionate kind of understanding can be heard coming from a person who has taken the effort to understand their own pain first:

There are a lot of people who are angry. They’re just angry because they’re angry. Maybe they’re angry because they’re having surgery tomorrow and they don’t want to have surgery. There are all kinds of things; maybe their wife has left them or whatever. If I’m not comfortable with my own anger which comes out of my family-of-origin stuff, there’s no way I can hear their anger.

He continued by suggesting that part of his job “is being able to listen to their anger and even blessed by it before I can do anything about it.”

Another understanding participant said, “[The systems understanding] allowed me to be much more compassionate and saying, ‘Okay, Where can we begin to impact some of the hurt? Where can I begin to work?’”

When respondents had much more understanding of the “big picture” of what goes on in systems, they were able to be more compassionate and More Understanding of others.

More Calm

More Calm denotes a person’s own internal sense of calm. It is distinct from just another way of saying Less Reactive or Less Anxious. More Calm validates itself as a separate theme because the data revealed people who were aware of this increased sense of calm without being able to link it to a lowered sense of anxiety or reactivity. It repeatedly rose from the data distinct from its “opposite” counterparts.

The quotes on this theme are probably the simplest of all. They say things as brief as, “After family systems I feel more calm.” When one respondent was asked what her spouse would say he had noticed about her, without hesitating, she said, “just the
sense that I am a little bit more calm.” One said, “I do recall particularly a couple of staff members saying that I seem to be calmer in situations.”

This theme more than any other could be seen on their faces even as they said it. They not only felt it and said it, but they looked More Calm too.

More Calming

There is a simple difference between this theme and the previous one. The previous one is a person’s sense of internal calm. This one is about a person’s impact on others. More Calming means that they have a calming effect on those they are around. This is not in a patronizing or shushing or stifling way, but in a real sense of being able to spread calm rather than anxiety.

One clergywoman, as she told the story of one particularly difficult meeting that turned out really well, described it this way:

The reality is that how I operate either helps feed people anxiety or diffuses it. In that particular instance the anxiety among all the people gathered around that table with about 14 to 15 folks—the anxiety was palpable! Everybody was anxious. But I found that if I can maintain the self-differentiation and not be hooked by that anxiety—that really diffuses a lot of other people’s anxiety.

Respondents spoke of how easy it was to see that anxiety was contagious in an emotional system but that it was encouraging to realize that calm could also be “spread.” Many found they could face an angry or scared or hurting person with an attitude of calm and in doing so were able to calm others as well. More Calming is about behaving in ways that bring anxiety levels down and “spread calm.”

Disconfirming Data

At this point it would be easy to conclude that this study has found the “silver bullet” for church leadership problems among clergy. However, even this study, which
had a fairly narrow scope of investigation into the application of Family Systems Theory to clergypersons and their leadership in congregations, also found some disconfirming data. Two of the 14 clergypersons in the study, Ed and Mary, had drastically lower incidences of the findings described above. A third, Vance, fell a little lower than the rest of the group in numbers of coded findings in his data, but still not nearly as low as Ed and Mary.

Ed and Mary, although they showed very little evidence of changed attitudes and practices, still showed some change even in their “Before and After” drawings (see Figure 15 and Figure 16), but the changes were slight. Statements in the interviews of these two made clear that they did not find the same value as the vast majority of their colleagues did.

When Mary was asked what got her interested in the program to begin with, she said, “I thought it was interesting. It kind of gave you a lineup of people and how they act in various situations. I didn’t put a whole lot in store by that, though.” Later she described again how it was not really something she took that seriously. “I heard about it through the continuing education . . . so I said, I need to keep on doing something. They offered that . . . so I went back.” Ed said, “A lot of people in [my denomination] were doing stuff out of *Generation to Generation* (Friedman, 1985), and so it allowed me to enter the conversation.”

Not only was their commitment to the class initially much lower, but, even after participating in the class, they also rated their perceived relevance of the material much lower than all the rest. These two rated the relevance to their personal lives the lowest of any at 2.5 and 3, and the relevance to their ministry at 2 and 3.5. None of the
clergypersons described in the preceding positive findings had rated the relevance they felt this material had to their ministry below a 4. When asked about the relevance to his ministry, Ed said, “I’m not sure that I’ve directly used it.”

Not much happened in attitudes and practices for these two either. Even though at one point he said he thought the understanding was helpful, when asked about any application he had made of his learning, Ed responded, “I don’t know that I have in any particular instance here, you know, just sat down and said, ‘Aha! This is what’s going on! This is what I need to use to figure out what’s going on.’” He had done a case study in the second year of the program, but could not remember what it was about or what he learned from it.

Ed characterizes his views on the whole topic by saying, “I think it’s helpful to have understanding, but it’s not the silver bullet for church life.” When asked if he found
Figure 16. Mary’s drawing showing very little change before and after.
his thinking or attitudes changing, he said, “I don’t think so. I think the little bit that I knew before and the way I approached things previously is pretty much the way I am. I don’t think I’ve done anything dramatically different.” He was also asked if anyone else noticed anything different about him over the course of the program. He said, “Not that I can recall now. No, I don’t think that came up with anybody.” Interestingly, my observation of him was that he seemed exactly the same as 3 years before. Of all 14 interviewed, he seemed to have changed the least of anyone—even in his physical appearance.

Mary’s answers were amazingly similar to Ed’s. She remarked, “I think there’s a lot of validity to the system, but nothing radical. It just gave me another way to look at things, I guess.” When asked if anyone else noticed anything different about her over the course of the program, her answer was simple, “I don’t think so.”

Mary’s and Ed’s answers were similar in many ways. The lack of application, changes in attitudes or practices, or even in anyone else noticing anything different in them were not the only similarities, however. Probably the most striking similarity was that they were both extremely reticent to talk about anything that touched on their own families or home life. They did not seem to have anything but the most superficial comments about their own family systems or dynamics that they were aware of in their own immediate families. It seems that the willingness to grapple with personal family applications of the systems theory may be an essential ingredient to finding growth and change in the clergyperson’s leadership in the congregation. This would confirm Friedman’s theory of the three interlocking families: the families of the congregation, the
congregation as a family, and the clergy’s own family. This is why Friedman (1985) says,

> Emotional process in religious organizations not only mirrors emotional process in personal families, but also, both types of family systems plug into one another. That is a major reason why unresolved issues in any of the clergy’s three families can produce symptoms in one of the others, and why within that emotional interlock often lies the key to knowledge or to further stress. (p. 195)

**Conclusion**

This study finds eight significant ways in which the attitudes and practices of the participating clergy changed. The background for fully understanding the impact of these eight comes from the other findings of the study.

*Understanding and Relevance* was found to be very high. The clergy understood the concepts they studied, and they perceived them to be very relevant to their personal lives and to their ministry leadership. The perceived relevance ensured more efforts put forward to apply the concepts in real life. Clergy in this study were found to have very strong and emphatic statements of the *Overall Value* of having participated in the program. Because a person has to be aware of a problem before they can begin to change it, it was significant that the clergypersons in the study were *More Aware of Systems* issues and principles—not just in theory but in practice. They also became *More Aware of Self* over the course of the program, and this made it possible for them to make the changes in attitudes and practices that I found.

As a result of their understanding and applying the Family Systems theories in their personal and professional lives, the clergy leaders in this study became *Less Reactive, Less Anxious, Less Entangled, Less Taking Things Personally, Less Blaming, More Understanding, More Calm*, and *More Calming.*
CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY

Introduction

This chapter reviews the problem and purpose of this study, the research question, the theoretical frameworks that guided the study, and the methods used. It concludes with the results, discussion, and the resulting recommendations.

The Problem

The Christian Church is supposed to be the body of Christ, which “grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph 4:16). Unfortunately, as chapter 1 describes in the “Background of the Problem,” this positive picture of a well-functioning Church is not often seen. Instead, many churches are “caught in vicious cycles” and there is a “chilly climate of anxiety” (A. B. Robinson, 2004) in too many churches. Clergy leadership dysfunction has often been identified as key to the problem (Friedman, 1985; R. W. Richardson, 2005; Steinke, 1996).

My pastoral experience, supported by a review of the literature, led to the formulation of this problem statement: Clergy persons without an awareness of their family system patterns and reactivity often exercise their leadership in unhealthy ways that are damaging to their congregations.

Seminaries and other religious organizations have been conducting programs to educate clergy persons on how Family Systems Theory can help clergy and
congregations achieve greater health for more than twenty years. However, no formal studies have been found that evaluate, assess, or describe the outcomes of these programs in the lives and leadership of the clergy who have participated.

Purpose of the Study

A number of different Clergy Family Systems programs are offered with the intention of improving the overall health and function of congregations by helping clergy persons understand these systems dynamics and apply the principles in their own families and congregations. Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (LPTS) conducted such a program with two phases, extending from 1999 to 2003, having what appear to be positive outcomes. The purpose of this study was to narratively describe the actual impact of this program on the clergy who participated.

Research Question

The primary research question was: In what ways have clergy persons who understood and personally applied concepts learned in Clergy Family Systems training programs experienced changes in their leadership attitudes and practices?

Theoretical Frameworks

The broad theoretical framework for this study was the Family Systems Theory of Murray Bowen (1966, 1978; Bowen & Sagar, 1997; M. E. Kerr & Bowen, 1988), which is commonly known as “Bowen Theory.” The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, also known as the Georgetown Family Center, continues to carry on Bowen’s work since his death in 1990. The Bowen Center website briefly describes Bowen’s theory this way:
Bowen family systems theory is a theory of human behavior that views the family as an emotional unit and uses systems thinking to describe the complex interactions in the unit. It is the nature of a family that its members are intensely connected emotionally. . . . The connectedness and reactivity make the functioning of family members interdependent. A change in one person's functioning is predictably followed by reciprocal changes in the functioning of others. (Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, 2009c, para. 2)

It is this system interrelatedness that completely changed the shape of family therapy. Other authors have tried to help readers get an image of this interrelatedness by using various visual illustrations or metaphors. John Bradshaw (1996) demonstrated the concept of dynamic homeostatic principle by using a mobile of a family. After starting the mobile, he would point out how it would always come to rest with the various pieces in basically the same balanced relationship with each other. Virginia Satir (1972) also used the mobile analogy, stressing that all family members must be taken into consideration to understand the type of balance (or homeostasis) that exists within a family.


The more specific theoretical framework guiding this study was built on Bowen Theory but specifically applied to clergypersons and congregations in a landmark work, Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue, by Edwin H. Friedman (1985). Friedman’s thesis is that all clergymen and clergywomen, irrespective of faith, are simultaneously involved in three distinct families whose emotional forces interlock: the families within the congregations, 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. (p. 1)

He goes on to propose and to show that employing the models and approaches of Bowen Family Systems Theory “will demonstrate how the same understanding of family life that can aid us in our pastoral role also has important ramifications for the way we function in our congregations” (p. 1).

Friedman then addresses some background about families and family process followed by major sections on each of the clergy’s “three families”—the families within the congregation, the congregation as a family system, and the personal families of the clergy. Details on how other authors have built on and elaborated on Friedman’s framework can be found in chapter 2.

Methods Used

This qualitative case study followed a narrative design using a constant comparative method of data analysis (Merriam, 1998, p. 159). The case studied was the cohort of clergypersons who participated in the 1999-2000 educational experience and also participated in the later training in 2002-2003 offered by the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary on the topic of clergy, congregations, and family systems. Every participant who could be located and was willing was interviewed. Out of the 17 original participants, 14 were interviewed. There were 6 female and 8 male clergy representing various faith traditions, including Presbyterian, United Methodist, Southern Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist, Quaker, Unitarian, Episcopal, and United Church of Christ.

I conducted semi-structured person-to-person interviews with each participant. I used open-ended questions as starting points (see Appendix A: Interview Protocol for the actual questions used) for each interview or “conversation with a purpose” (Dexter, 1970,
Interviews were audio recorded digitally with a small and unobtrusive audio player/recorder and then transcribed for review and coding. The transcribed interviews were imported into MAXqda2 Qualitative research software where they were coded and analyzed for emerging themes.

Methods used to enhance internal validity included triangulation, member checks, peer examination, and “clarifying the researcher’s assumptions, worldview, and theoretical orientation at the outset of the study” (Merriam, 1998, p. 205). Details of how these methods were applied can be found in chapter 3. The narratives found in chapter 4 give the reader the ability to form an image of how leadership attitudes and practices are altered in clergypersons who come to understand and personally apply Family Systems Theory to the congregational context and their leadership as clergy. This image provides readers the ability to assess for themselves whether the results of this analysis fit a particular situation (Eisner, 1998, p. 199), thus providing external validity or generalizability or what Firestone (1993) calls case-to-case transfer.

**Results**

The vast majority of clergypersons who participated in this study were found to have a good understanding of the topic and saw it as highly relevant to their personal lives and to their ministries. There was a very high statement of the Overall Value that the training from LPTS had for them. They indicated that Bowen Theory, or Family Systems Theory, applied to clergy and congregations provided a way of looking at things and dealing with challenges that they would continue to value throughout their lives.
Participants were found to be *More Aware of Systems* and to be *More Aware of Self*. When they saw the concepts of the theory playing out in real life around them they were then more aware of how they played into it as well.

Their attitudes and practices had indeed changed since participating in the LPTS program. These changes showed up in their being *Less Reactive, Less Anxious, Less Entangled, Less Taking Things Personally, Less Blaming, More Understanding, More Calm*, and even *More Calming* to others. These changes took place both in their families and in their leadership in their congregations.

**Discussion**

Based on these positive findings alone it would seem obvious that this is an experiential educational process that has great potential to dramatically improve the health of congregations everywhere. The improvement comes through clergy being willing to take a serious look at their own emotional process, their own families, and their own families of origin. They will find not only habitual patterns of functioning that increase anxiety and decrease healthy function, but they will also find strengths that can be built upon. As they become aware of these patterns and take steps to begin to shift them, this cannot help but improve the “mirroring” health of the congregations that they serve. This process is not a linear one in which first a clergyperson strengthens his or her own family and then deals with the congregational family. It is much more fluid and dynamic than that, but the willingness to let the clergyperson’s own family be “on the table” for examination and work is essential for being able to address the congregational system issues.
Much effort goes into pastoral training and education in many areas, but as Ron Richardson (2005) points out,

Experience teaches us, through some unfortunate but dramatic pastoral examples in recent years, that it is not just biblical or theological knowledge or level of piety or amount of prayer or depth of devotion or particular pastoral skills that lead to a successful ministry. Success also has to do with a pastor’s level of emotional maturity. (p. 2)

Richardson further explains that

whatever aspect of ministry we are engaged in, family systems theory understands that we are inevitably involved, at many levels, in the emotional systems of all the people we work with, and that this involvement must—most essentially—include our own emotional system. (p. 3)

While it is essential for anyone involved with congregations or clergy to understand the importance of this theory, if the theory does not connect with the practice it is just words on a page making no impact on actual life. What this current study shows clearly is that there is an educational process that has demonstrated in actual practice over a period of years that Family Systems Theory applied to clergy and congregational systems can alter the attitudes and actual practices of a clergyperson’s leadership in a positive way. The case of the continuing education program at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary described in this study has shown this to be true.

It is rewarding, satisfying, and even exciting to see theory come to life and improve not only a professional clergyperson’s personal life but also their professional leadership. This excitement then propels us into the question, “What should we then do?”
Recommendations

Clergy and Clergy Families

To clergy I unequivocally recommend finding a place to get involved in a training on Family Systems Theory as applied to clergy and congregations. The findings of this study show clearly that there can be significant improvements in your leadership and ability to minister to your congregations. The awarenesses you gain of the congregation as a system will pull back the veil on dynamics that otherwise can be very mystifying and challenging. You will also have greater understanding of families within the congregation and will find yourself knowing better how to guide family members in various struggles they face. I am not talking about deep, long-term family counseling—just some of the small conversations here or there where they are looking for some direction without going into a full counseling scenario.

You will also find that it can be very helpful to the dynamics in your own family. As a clergy family, your family dynamics not only impact the dynamics in the congregation as a family, but it is also true that functioning of the congregational family impacts your own personal family. Friedman (1985), referring to families of the church, the church family, and the clergy’s own family explains, “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 all three” (p. 1). All clergy know that the ministry can be stressful to the clergy’s family, but not all clergy understand mechanisms by which the emotional process in the congregation spills over into the clergy’s family. Understanding this is the first step to reducing any negative effects this may have in your family.
There are many ways to take in the information on this topic, but to see the greatest benefits you will also need to seek out a great way to work through the process of applying the information as well. While some benefit can be gained by reading some of the many books and articles found in the reference list at the end of this study, the real benefit will not be attained without practical application in your own life. This requires some vulnerability and willingness to step down off of the pedestal upon which clergy are often placed—and sometimes like. You will have the best success if you can avail yourself of a program that has a good instructor/mentor and good peer group to process with as you apply the material to your own life.

Denominational Leaders

What denominational leader would not like to spend less of their time solving quarrels between churches and their clergy? What denominational leader would not like to have clergypersons who are less reactive, less blaming of others, not so caught up in the entanglements of their congregations, more understanding, and who bring an attitude and an ability of calming to difficult situations? As a denominational leader, I’m sure you have seen clergy who seem to feed anxiety rather than diffuse it. This study reveals one great way to experience more of these desired qualities among the clergy who serve in your organization. My recommendation to you is to search out programs already available within your territory and at least make it possible, desirable, and reimbursable for your clergy to attend one of these training/mentoring programs. If there is not one actively functioning in your area, there are ways to get one started. The Healthy Congregations (2009) organization is one good place to find information on trainings and people who may be in your area who have been trained to be trainers.
Of course, if you want people who work under you to take advantage of these types of learning and growing opportunities, it will be most effective if you, as a leader, are willing to avail yourself of the same kind of opportunity. While all denominational structures are a little different, most still have many of the same systems properties that local congregations have. As a leader in that system, you can dramatically improve your ability to lead by taking the same concepts into application in your own life and leadership.

Local Church Leaders

In some communities of faith, you, the local church leaders, are the ones responsible for clergy employment decisions and continuing education decisions, because there is not a larger organization to which you belong. In such cases, you should take note of the recommendations above to denominational administrators.

In all communities of faith, however, the local church leaders have a role and a responsibility to your clergy and your congregation regardless of what responsibility other authorities in your organization may or may not take. Even if there is not a strong leadership encouragement or directive coming from the organization regarding this kind of training, you can speak to your clergy person, to your board, or to whatever governing body has responsibility for your local congregation and ask for this type of training, not only for your current clergyperson but also for your congregation and its leaders. There are various types of trainings available to come into the local church and help the congregation learn these principles in easy-to-understand terminology. Every family and every leader in the congregation can benefit from this. You have a God-given responsibility to your congregation, and you can take leadership—respectfully and
appropriately—to bring to light something that can improve the health of the congregation to make it more able to carry out its God-given mission.

Seminaries and Educational Institutions

Seminaries and other educational institutions that have anything to do with preparing men and women to be clergypersons—leaders of congregations—must recognize the truth of Richardson’s (2005) assertion that “it is not just biblical or theological knowledge or level of piety or amount of prayer or depth of devotion or particular pastoral skills that lead to a successful ministry. Success also has to do with a pastor’s level of emotional maturity” (p. 2). Unfortunately, it is usually much easier for us to point to examples in which a lack of emotional maturity led to a serious disaster in some community of faith, but there are many occasions where a leader with a high level of emotional maturity has frequently diverted disaster as well. If the goal of educational institutions is to prepare these students for the career they are called by God to, then this need for the development of emotional maturity must be taken seriously. It must be addressed in the curriculum. There must be not only opportunities, but requirements and provisions as well, for the proper training, coaching, mentoring, and counseling where needed in order to assure that these deep foundational issues have been addressed. While all of us continue to grow and learn through life, and we would not expect all these issues to be “solved” before a person graduates from the seminary, I think we can expect that there is at least a very clear awareness of the issues and how emotional systems function, that there is a recognition of how that relates personally to each student, and that there has been a process started that shows signs of progress in reaching a reasonably good starting level of emotional maturity.
Researchers

For researchers, the opportunities for further study are vast. This topic calls for researchers who have a strong understanding of communities of faith and the special leadership demands and requirements of spiritual leaders as opposed to leaders in other areas such as business or education. The fact that religious leaders are dealing with the “God-factor” makes it very easy for people (especially when under pressure to learn, change, grow, or admit a particular need) to very convincingly make dodging statements such as the following: “Well, we just need to pray more about it.” “If we were all studying God’s Word and praying as we should, these issues wouldn’t even come up.” “Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord.”

The challenge is that as believers we do accept the importance of prayer, the study of God’s Word, and the guiding and convicting power of the Holy Spirit to change people’s hearts and attitudes when they submit to Him. At the same time, we cannot bury our heads in the spiritual sand and assume that nothing else that has been learned in the last 2,000 years can be relevant to our acting responsibly as God-fearing, spiritually minded leaders in this post-modern world.

So researchers who pursue further study of this topic must skillfully and prayerfully assess, choose, and integrate information and understandings from two different worlds—the spiritual life and practice, and also the psychology and sociology of human experience in families. For those who are drawn or called to pursue this delicate area of study, the following are some areas that need further work.

What are the specific educational practices that made this program at LPTS as successful as it was? Were all the best tools of adult learning applied in the most
effective way possible? Are there ways in which the best learning theory that is known today can be adapted to be even more effective with the unique challenges of the clergy?

Richardson (2005) says that this kind of work requires a strong sense of personal motivation. How can seminaries and other educational institutions require some degree of progress in this topic while still being sensitive to the personal nature of the subject?

“This work is partly about personal courage,” says Richardson (p. 9). “I have been privileged as a pastoral counselor to observe people engage in what can only be called ‘heroic’ acts of emotional bravery as they have reconnected with family members in new ways.” What has the educational world learned about helping students make progress in learning things that require this kind of “emotional bravery,” and how can these learnings best be applied with this topic for this group of people?

Finally, more study can be given to professional education programs that are already functioning, such as the one at LPTS or the various Healthy Congregations trainings, and further study can be done on levels of effectiveness in different areas, what makes them effective, and what makes the difference where they do not seem to be effective.

Conclusions

Those who have experienced the pains of dys-functioning congregations, as I described in chapter 1, long to see greater health and more satisfying relationships in congregations. Furthermore, this is not seen as just something that “would be nice.” It does not have quite the same meaning as a hotel chain wanting their employees to be more courteous and polite so that they can get more customers and make more money. As followers of God, we believe it is crucial to our mission to the world to represent Him
well by fulfilling Jesus’ own words, “All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another” (John 13:35).

This study has cited previous work founded on Bowen Family Systems Theory that has shown that a very important part of the overall health of congregations can be addressed by understanding the congregation as an emotional system. It has been shown from the literature as well as from the participants in this study that the greatest positive impact on this system comes from clergy leaders addressing the systems dynamics of their own families. When they take this learning into their interactions with the congregation as a family, greater health is achieved. What Herrington et al. (2003) said has proven true:

Pastors must first focus on managing themselves rather than managing others and begin to think in a different way about how people in living systems affect each other. As pastors learn to manage themselves, they can lead more calmly in the midst of anxious times. (p. 66)

This study has shown that clergypersons participating in a continuing education program at LPTS that addressed these concepts have found dramatic improvements in their leadership attitudes and practices in the congregation and believe that this training has provided “the most valuable tool” in their ministry toolboxes.

May this tool be supplied to many more ministry toolboxes around the globe!
APPENDIX
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

*Introductions and presentation of the Informed Consent form:*
Briefly review points from the Informed Consent. Explain the use of the digital recorder and how its contents will be safeguarded. Be clear about the expected time frame. Establish safety.

*Primary Research Question:*
Read the primary research question and explain that this will be the main intent of the interview, but that other questions will be asked to round out the picture.

Research Question: In what ways have clergy persons who understood and personally applied concepts learned in Clergy Family Systems training programs experienced positive changes in their leadership attitudes and practices?

*Warming up...* (Ask for any journals, papers, genograms or case studies they may have.)

1. Is there any background story about why you got involved in the Congregational Family Systems program?
2. What awareness of Congregational Family Systems did you have before you started the class?

*Understanding, Relevance, and Application...*

3. Thinking back to the program, how would you rate your level of understanding of what was presented? On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being “very little” and 5 being “to a great extent?”
4. a. How would you rate the relevance you felt it had to your personal life? On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being “irrelevant” and 5 being “extremely relevant?”
   b. How would you rate the relevance you felt it had to your ministry? On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being “irrelevant” and 5 being “extremely relevant?”
   c. Follow-up question: Can you describe what made it a “2”? - or - Why a “4”?
5. Can you tell me about any application you made of the Systems concepts that were presented in the program?
6. What was the most significant experience or learning for you? Why was that most significant?
7. What, if anything disappointed you about the program?

*Attitudes and Practices...*

8. Did you find your thinking or attitudes changing about dynamics in your congregation or family? In your leadership? Can you tell me more about that?
9. Did anyone (parishioners, colleagues, friends, or family members) notice anything different about you over the course of the program? If so, what?

10. Can you tell me about any specific changes (large or small) that you made in your leadership practices or family habits during and after the program?

11. Can you draw me a picture describing how things were for you before the program and then after it was over? (flowchart, drawing) Describing the difference between how you were at the beginning of the program and how you are now.

Follow-up…

12. What have you done, if anything, to continue to pursue this topic since then?

13. What, if anything, would enable you to make more progress in applying these concepts?

14. What would you like to tell me about this whole experience and its impact in your life that I haven’t asked you about yet?

Closure

15. Thank-you for participating!

16. Remind / assure how information will be handled.

17. Do you have any questions or comments you’d like to share with me?
APPENDIX B

ANSWERS TO IMPORTANT IRB QUESTIONS
APPENDIX B

ANSWERS TO IMPORTANT IRB QUESTIONS

1. A brief description of the purpose, methods, and time frame of the research.

The purpose of the research is to study the impacts on ministry attitudes and practices of clergy persons who have participated in the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary’s (LPTS) Clergy Family Systems continuing education program. The methodology used will be a qualitative case study using personal interviews with subjects who participated in the continuing education program. Interviews will be conducted during the Summer and Fall of 2006.

2. A description of the subjects, indicating explicitly whether any are minors (under age 18 per Michigan law) or otherwise members of "vulnerable" populations or other jurisdictions who lack full capacity to secure their own rights and give informed consent.

The subjects are all professional clergy persons who voluntarily participated in the seminary’s program. None of the subjects are minors or members of any vulnerable population.

3. A description of how subjects will be recruited and how they will be involved, including the criteria used for determining the inclusion/exclusion of subjects.

The subjects will be recruited by invitation via email or phone call from the researcher. The involvement for each will be responding to interview questions in person, on the telephone or in writing. The subjects may also provide to the researcher written materials they produced as a part of the seminary program. Subjects will be included in the group based on recommendations from the professor who facilitated the program. He will be asked to recommend participants who appeared to have a reasonably good grasp of the clergy family systems concepts and their application to the participant’s own life personally and professionally as evidenced in the participant’s case studies shared with the group and their participation in class discussions.

4. A statement of the benefits of the research to the human subjects, if any, and of the benefits to humanity and/or scientific knowledge.
The benefits of this study to the participants themselves will be in their reviewing, discussing and refreshing the concepts of clergy Family Systems Theory and the application of these concepts in their personal and professional lives. Much broader benefits will come to the general Christian community through this research by showing the value of clergy family systems awareness among clergy and administrators. Denominational and Church decision-makers will see what the values of a program such as the LPTS program are to individual clergy persons and their ability to effectively lead their congregations.

5. A detailed explanation of how the welfare and rights of subjects whose competency to give informed consent is compromised are to be protected if such subjects are to be involved in the research.

No subjects will be included in this study whose competency to give informed consent is compromised.

6. A description of the risks and discomforts, if any, to the subjects. Such deleterious effects may be physical, psychological, or social. Some research involves neither risks nor discomforts but rather violations of normal expectations. Such violations, if any, should be specified.

This study will not expose the subjects to any risks or discomforts. They are free to skip any question. No subject will be pressed to go further than they wish in responding to any questions. Social risks will be eliminated by not using any of the subject’s real names in any published parts of the study. Other steps will be taken to disguise the subject’s identity by not using congregation names or specific location names in referring to their experiences. In some cases general denominational names may be used when it will be helpful to interpreting the findings without significant risk of disclosing the identity of the clergy person.

The location of the interviews (if in person) will at the subject’s choice be either at their home or place of work or a neutral office space made available by the researcher.

7. A description of the means to be taken to minimize each such deleterious effect or violation, including the means by which the subjects’ personal privacy is to be protected and the confidentiality of information received is to be maintained.

See answer to #6 above.
APPENDIX C

LPTS FIRST YEAR COURSE DESCRIPTION AND SYLLABUS
APPENDIX C

LPTS FIRST YEAR COURSE DESCRIPTION AND SYLLABUS

This appendix contains the letter giving the description of the first year course including the assignment for the first session. Following that is the course syllabus which gives the recommended textbooks, dates and schedule, and the specific topics and assignments for each session.
The Rev. Mike Auferhar  
St. Matthews 7th Day Adventist  
125 Watterson Trail  
Middletown, KY 40243  

Dear Mike:  

We are so excited about your decision to join us for the 1999-2000 Family Systems Seminar. The list of participants looks great, and we look forward to learning and working together with you over the next eight months.  

Some important information:  

- The September 16 Pete Steinke Conference will be held in the Fellowship Hall, with registration in the Winn Center at 8:30 a.m. We will start at 9:00, and lunch is included.  

- Please make sure you have held the seminar dates of October 21, November 18, December 16, January 20, February 17, March 23, and April 27. We will begin our seminar by 9:00 (with coffee and fellowship from 8:30 - 9:00). The seminars will be held in the small dining rooms (A and B) of the Winn Center. Lunch will not be included for the seminar meetings. There is a cafeteria in the Winn Center, as well as close area restaurants.  

- Our curriculum is exciting! Some of it is adapted from material provided by a highly successful program initiated by the East Ohio Area of the United Methodist Church, Program in Pastoral Care and Counseling. The texts we will be using are Friedman’s Generation to Generation and Richardson’s Family Ties That Bind. These are both available in the Seminary’s Cokesbury Bookstore.  

- Those who are taking the seminar for D.Min. credit should also purchase, Carter and McGoldrick, The Expanded Family Life Cycle. D.Min. Requirements will be shared and reviewed at our October 21st meeting.  

- Please read Friedman, Chapters 1 and 2 and Richardson, Chapters 1, 2, and 8 prior to our October 21 meeting. It will greatly enhance our discussion.  

Louisville Seminary Counseling Ministry  
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Louisville, KY 40205-1798  
502 895-3411 Fax 502 895-1096  

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• Come prepared to construct your own family genogram. Do this by gathering some information on the members in your family for three generations (i.e., your family, your parent’s family, and your grandparent’s family). Use Chapter 8 of Richardson as a resource.

Again, we look forward to our time together. If you have any questions prior to October 21, please call either of us at (502) 895-3411. Otherwise, we look forward to seeing you at the September 16 Steinke Conference.

Blessings,

George D. Carter
Professor of Ministry
Director of Clinical Pastoral Education

Sheri Ferguson
Director
Louisville Seminary Counseling Ministry

Enclosure
LOUISVILLE PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Continuing Education Seminar
Family Systems Seminar Syllabus
October, 1999 - April, 2000

Instructors: Sheri Ferguson
George Carter

In this intensive seven-month seminar, the basic concepts of family systems theory will be presented. Both didactic and experiential learning will be utilized. A part of the experiential design will come in the process by which participants will be encouraged by various assignments to look at the interfacing of their own families of origin, and of their families of choice, with the congregational families they serve.

Because of the personal dimension of the seminar, we ask all participants to make a covenant to confidentiality which reverently holds personal information that emerges.

Recommended Texts

Ronald W. Richardson, FAMILY TIES THAT BIND: A SELF-HELP GUIDE TO CHANGE THROUGH FAMILY OF ORIGIN THEORY (International Self-Counsel Press Ltd.)

Edwin H. Friedman, GENERATION TO GENERATION (Guilford Press)

Dates and Schedule

The seminar will be on Thursdays: October 21, November 18, December 16, January 20, February 17, March 23, April 27.

Normally the daily schedule will be as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Coffee and Fellowship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Session I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:45 a.m.</td>
<td>Session II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 noon</td>
<td>Lunch (On Your Own)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:15 p.m.</td>
<td>Session III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:30 p.m.</td>
<td>Break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:45 p.m.</td>
<td>Reflections on the Day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Meeting Schedule, Readings, Topics

October 21, 1999

Reading: Friedman, chapter 1, "The Idea of a Family"; chapter 2, "Understanding Family Process"; Richardson, chapter 1, "Introduction"; chapter 2, "Families are Strange Creatures"; chapter 8, "Doing the Work".

Assignments:
- Begin developing your own genogram
- Be prepared to share some of the stories of your own family of origin (Describe relationships, significant events and changes, and family rules)

Teaching Topics:
- Genograms
- Concepts of family systems theory

November 18, 1999

Reading: Friedman, chapter 3, "The Marital Bond"; Richardson, chapter 3, "You Never Talk to Me-Closeness and Distance Among Family Members"; chapter 7, "Who's on First? Birth Order and Gender Position in the Family of Origin".

Assignments:
- Revise and expand your genogram
- Be prepared to reflect on the dynamics of distance and closeness in your family of origin

Topics:
- Distance and closeness
- Boundaries
- Family Life Cycle
- Siblings and birth order

December 16, 1999

Reading: Friedman, chapter 7, "A Family Approach to Life Cycle Ceremonies".

Assignments:
- How did your family of origin observe Christmas? What about now in your family of choice?
- How does your family or origin, and of choice, deal with death and loss?
Topics:
* Death and loss and the Family Life Cycle
* Rituals and Ceremonies
* What Goes on in Families and Churches in Advent and Christmas?

January 20, 2000

Reading: Richardson, chapter 6, "Triangles in Relationships". Friedman, chapter 4, "Child-Focused Families"; chapter 5, "Body and soul in Family Process"; chapter 6, "When the parent Becomes the Child".

Assignments:
* Develop your definition of "triangulation" and describe from your church family an event that demonstrates the dynamics of triangulation

Topics:
* Triangles
* Anxiety
* Parenting
* Depression
* Alcoholism
* Suicide in Families
* Divorce Cycle

February 17, 2000

Reading: Richardson, chapter 5, "How to be True to Yourself and Still Have Friends". Friedman, chapter 9, "Leadership and Self in a Congregational Family".

Assignments:
* From your own life and family, or from your congregation, tell a story that illustrates the dynamics of differentiation.

Topics:
* Differentiation of Self
* Emotional Forces of the Family System
* Leadership and Self Differentiation

March 23, 2000

Reading: Friedman, chapter 8, "Family Process and Organizational Life"; chapter 11, "The Immediate Family: Conflicts and Traps"; chapter 12, "The Extended Family: Its Potential for Salvation".
Assignments:
  * Tell a brief story that highlights leadership that has been impressive to you and indicate why it was significant for you

Topics:
  * Clergy and leadership
  * Leadership from a Staff Position
  * Non-Anxious Presence

April 27, 2000

Reading: Friedman, chapter 10, "Leaving and Entering a Congregational Family".

Assignment:
  * In what ways has this seminar process changed, or not changed you, and what do you perceive to be your next professional or personal growth endeavors?

Topics:
  * Nodal Events and Rites of Passage
  * Traits of Healthy Congregations
APPENDIX D

LPTS SECOND YEAR COURSE DESCRIPTION AND SYLLABUS
APPENDIX D

LPTS SECOND YEAR COURSE DESCRIPTION AND SYLLABUS

The course description for the second year course came in this letter from the seminary. The “syllabus” that follows is not really a formal syllabus, but the letter does give the essential details: dates, schedule for each day, and the textbooks that will be referenced. Since the majority of class times was to be spent on case studies it was not necessary to outline topics for each month’s meeting. Two names of participants were blacked out to protect their identity.

For the directions on the Case Study Assignment, see Appendix E.
June 27, 2002

Mike Aulderhar  
125 Watterson Trail  
Middletown, KY 40243

Dear Mike:

Greetings from Louisville Seminary! I hope this letter finds your summer going well. I have more information to share with you regarding our follow-up consultation program with Family Systems theory.

During the 2002-2003 academic year, David Sawyer (our new Director of Graduate Studies) and I are offering a “Clergy Self-Leadership” group. This group is open only to those of you who have completed a Family Systems seminar held at LPTS with me. The Clergy Self-Leadership group will take place at Laws Lodge from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. on these Thursdays:

September 19  October 17  December 19  
January 16  February 20  March 20  and April 24.

The general daily format looks like this. A member of the group will prepare and present a case study that describes a critical event in their church family/system that the group member would like consultation about. An outline will be provided with the intention to help the presenter be structured and self-focused, not other-focused. Approximately one and a half hours will be given to this exercise, and we will try to cover two a day. Additionally, there will be some review of didactic material and, in small groups, there will be more in-depth personal genogram work.

The format assumes that the participants are in a covenant relationship which not only includes a rotation of case study presentations and confidentiality, but also the willingness to challenge and support one another in the journey towards becoming a more self-defined leader.

The cost for the seven Clergy Self-Leadership group meetings is $200.00 and the group will be limited to 20 participants. If you are reading this letter and know these meetings are for you, please detach the registration/confirmation form below and send it, along with the fee, to Yvonne Jasmin-Gillenwater by August 15, 2002. Once you’ve signed on, additional materials will be sent to you. CEUs will be available.
I look forward to hearing from you.

Blessings,

Sheri Ferguson
Director, Marriage and Family Therapy Program
Director, Louisville Seminary Counseling Ministry

:bt

cc: David Sawyer
    Yvonne Jasmin-Gillenwater

P.S. On Wednesday, November 20, Pete Steinke will be on campus presenting “Leadership in an emotional system: A Family Systems perspective.” This event will be handled separately and you should receive a brochure by early September.
August 20, 2002

Mike Aufderhar
819 Creek Valley Road
Louisville, KY 40243

Dear Mike:

Welcome to the “Clergy Self-Leadership” group! We are excited about our time together this year, and look forward to what we have to learn from each other. We will meet the 3rd Thursday of each month, September – April. The dates and location are as follows: (Please note the change of location in January and March.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 19</td>
<td>Grubbs Conference Room, Laws Lodge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 17</td>
<td>Grubbs Conference Room, Laws Lodge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(November 20</td>
<td>Steinke Seminar – Laws Lodge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 19</td>
<td>Grubbs Conference Room, Laws Lodge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 16</td>
<td>McAtee Dining Rooms A &amp; B, Winn Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 20</td>
<td>Grubbs Conference Room, Laws Lodge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 20</td>
<td>Lower Level Conference Room, Laws Lodge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 24</td>
<td>Grubbs Conference Room, Laws Lodge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The general format of each session will be:

- 8:45 – 9:00: Arrive; have coffee and light breakfast
- 9:00 – 9:30: Didactic review of systems concepts
- 9:30 – 11:00: Case study
- 11:00 – 12:00: Small group genogram work
- 12:00 – 1:00: Lunch
- 1:00 – 1:30: Review of concepts
- 1:30 – 3:00: Case study

An outline is enclosed to use as a guide when it’s your turn to prepare a case study for presentation. X XXXX X and X XXXX X have agreed to present case studies at our first meeting. We ask that your case study be written up, so it can be distributed to participants on the day it is presented. Please try to limit your write-up to one page (remember, Steinke says, “anxiety can cause too much data gathering.”).

For reference and review on family systems dynamics, see Friedman, E. Generation to Generation, Steinke, P. How Your Church Family Works, Richardson, R. Creating a Healthier

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www.lpts.edu

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Church, Lerner, H. Dance of Intimacy, and Gilbert, R. Extraordinary Relationships. For your convenience, copies of these books are available in the LPTS Bookstore.

Remember to bring your own genogram!

We both look forward to seeing you and to our time together this year. See you in September!

Blessings,

Sheri Ferguson
Director, Marriage and Family Therapy Program
Director, Louisville Seminary Counseling Ministry

David Sawyer
Director, Graduate Studies and Continuing and Lay Education

Enclosure

(David sends his regrets that he will be unable to join us in September and looks forward to seeing you in October.)
APPENDIX E

LPTS CASE STUDY ASSIGNMENT DIRECTIONS
APPENDIX E

LPTS CASE STUDY ASSIGNMENT DIRECTIONS

This appendix contains the directions that were given for completing the Case Study assignments. The majority of the class time in the second year course was spent on presenting case studies and having discussion and giving feedback on them.
Clergy Self-Leadership
Case Study

This process rests in the covenant relationship we have with each other to honor confidentiality. We also agree to challenge and support each other on the road toward becoming a non-anxious self-defined leader.

1. **How can the group be helpful to you?** Be specific about the kind of feedback you want. In what ways do you want the group to support and challenge you?

2. **Describe a real event in your church system that is representative of the way you and others are functioning in the system.**

3. **What family systems dynamics do you see as relevant to this event?** Consider:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>16. Sibling position</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. **Describe your own anxiety and reactivity to this event.** Consider:
   a. The connection between your reactivity in the event to the functioning of your Family of Origin.
   b. How successful or unsuccessful were you with maintaining a non-reactive position, defining a clear bottom line, and staying self-defined?
   c. How did you respond to the anxiety? (i.e. overfunctioning, underfunctioning, fighting, pursuing, distancing, becoming other-focused)
   d. Describe when you functioned out of the following areas of the brain: Reptilian, Mammalian, and Neo-Cortex.
   e. Describe how successful you were at staying focused on: self, not others; strength, not weakness; process, not content; challenge, not comfort; integrity, not unity; system, not symptom; direction, not condition?

5. **Charting the system. Include:**
   a. Drawings of any relevant extended family fields, i.e. relevant genograms.
   b. Timelines that include the significant social events.
   c. Drawings of triangles that indicate whether relationships are fused, conflictual, distant, cutoff, or close.

6. **Theological Reflection**
   a. Where is God in this?
   b. What scriptures apply?
   c. Am I addressing this issue in my prayer life?

Adapted with permission by Rev. James Cox
REFERENCE LIST
REFERENCE LIST


Bowen, M., Bradt, J. O., Framo, J. L., Friedman, E. H., Gillis-Donovan, J., Kerr, K. E., et al. (1991). *Conversations about Murray Bowen* [Videorecording (vid); Videocassette (vca); VHS tape (vhs)]. Washington, DC: AAMFT.


VITA
Education:
Ph.D. May 2010 Andrews University, Leadership
M.A. May 1987 Andrews University, Religion
B.A. June 1986 Walla Walla College, Computer Science and Theology

Professional Experience:

2004 – Present Senior Pastor
Wenatchee Seventh-day Adventist Church
Wenatchee, Washington

1999 – 2004 Family Ministries Director
Kentucky-Tennessee Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
Louisville, Kentucky

1999 - 2004 Pastor
Middletown Seventh-day Adventist Church
Louisville, Kentucky

1995 -1998 Information Services Director
Pacific Cataract and Laser Institute
Chehalis, Washington

1993 – 1995 Family Ministries Director
Washington Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
Bothell, Washington

1993 – 1995 Pastor
Edmonds Seventh-day Adventist Church
Edmonds, Washington

1987 – 1993 Pastor
Bonney Lake Seventh-day Adventist Church
Bonney Lake, Washington

1985 – 1987 Instructor
Andrews University Computer Labs
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