

Running Header: FAMILY SYSTEMS AND CONGREGATIONS

Family Systems Theory
as Applied to Congregational Dynamics

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by

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Introduction

Family systems theory, especially as it is interpreted and applied by Bowen Theory, is an attractive model to church leaders because congregations are similar to families in their internal emotional dynamics and because family systems is an easily transferable framework for interpreting all forms of social behavior even though the nuclear family is its primary focus. According to Bowen Theory, whenever people spend significant time together they experience emotional fusion and this creates the necessary conditions for an emotional system which is the building block for all human interaction. This system provides the basic unit of analysis for Bowen Theory and can be applied to all groups and communities as a universal construct. Leaders of congregations have found it particularly helpful because leadership roles within churches are often construed and experienced as familial, the metaphorical language of family systems naturally lends itself to congregational parallels, and Bowen included the topic of spirituality throughout his writings, at one time reflecting that a spiritual perspective could be added as one of the main components of Bowen Theory.

I discovered family systems theory through the writings of Edwin Friedman about 16 years ago. I had experienced two church splits in my congregation and I was desperate for insights into understanding the perplexing dynamics of conflict in church life. A friend suggested I read *Generation to Generation* (1985), Friedman's classic on applying "family process" as he calls it, to churches and synagogues. I hungrily devoured it, almost in one sitting. For me, the most powerful insight was the idea that a leader should refrain from obsessing over, and attempting to change "difficult" people in the congregation. I realized that I was actually empowering bad behavior instead of

quashing it. Indeed, I was not only participating in the problem, my thinking and actions were the center and cause of most of the difficulties I had been experiencing. I had equated good leadership with skillful negotiating ability and was trying to “manage” challenging individuals in the congregation more tactfully. This is not an entirely bad thing to do of course, but in fact, the way out of what was becoming a cyclical pattern in my ministry – difficult people becoming more and not less, difficult – was to become more aware of my own functioning in the system, recognize my most helpful and strategic role in the larger system, and see and lead the whole while not getting “triangled” into the dramas of the neediest and most anxious members. What follows is a summary of family systems theory as it relates to leaders of congregations, especially as I have interpreted systems theory as applied to congregations and found it helpful. I discuss the principles of “systems thinking” primarily in the context of leadership because according to family systems theory, it is the leader “and a few people at the top” who have the most leverage and opportunity to change the system (Friedman, 1985, p. 221). As well, I work with the leaders of congregations as a pastor of, and consultant to, pastors.

The Congregation as an Emotional System

Murray Bowen was careful to not equate congregations with families in his terminology. He believed that that referring to a congregation (or any organization) as a family created confusion, especially for people who were already “undifferentiated” and needing to get too many of their needs met in the congregational system. A congregation is not unlike a family; it is, in fact, much like a family. The usage of the term “family,” instead of “emotional system,” however, may create more confusion of

roles than clarity: “There are those who refer to the work relationship system as a ‘family.’ My thesis is that it might be similar to a family, but it is not a family” (Bowen, 1978, p. 462). It is like a family in that it experiences anxiety, conflict, under and overfunctioning reciprocity and triangling.

An emotional system is defined by how emotionally invested the members are in each other. Mutual emotional investment increases the odds that anxiety may “infect” a system; that is, that it may paralyze its member’s ability to function interdependently and inhibit the group from functioning effectively collectively. In any emotional system, when anxiety rises, it is the most vulnerable and/or the most responsible people who are the repositories for anxiety overload. The reaction to anxiety overload is usually for individuals to “glob on” to others or the group by overfunctioning in other’s space, to “cut-off” relationships, or to underfunction and create distance. The goal is to first be aware of this tendency in oneself, manage one’s own anxiety and emotional pain thresholds: “If one family member can successfully increase his or her threshold for another’s pain, the others own threshold will also increase, thus expanding his or her range of functioning” (Friedman, 1985, p. 47.) Leadership in an anxious environment entails letting other’s experience pain without relieving it for them. This is difficult enough, but for those in the helping professions, such as pastors, it is especially counterintuitive. “Those who focus only on comfort, or relieving pain, or filling another’s need, tend to forget that another’s need may be *not* to have their needs fulfilled” (ibid, p. 48).

Simply stated, churches are often rife with immature behavior because church leaders are especially vulnerable to the idea that low tolerance for other’s pain is a

noble and loving quality. Family process theory emphasizes the need to build capacity rather than enable the less differentiated by overfunctioning. A common axiom within systems literature is that a leader has the system he or she deserves, and the system has the leader it deserves. In other words, leaders and congregations evolve or devolve based on their mutually reinforcing and reciprocating behaviors.

Interlocking and Reinforcing Systems

Friedman's somewhat unique approach to family process as it relates to congregation is that there are three interlocking and reinforcing "families" at work in a congregation: "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" (Friedman, 1985, p. 1). His purpose in conceptualizing the congregation in this way is to help pastors to become aware of their position in each of these systems and to recognize the common patterns that emerge and interact with each other: "Stress is less the result of some quantitative notion such as 'overwork' and more the effect of our position in the triangle of our families" (ibid).

When leaders understand the importance of defining self more clearly, remaining non-anxious in an anxious environment, and managing the emotional triangles within systems more adeptly, there is less need to become an "expert" on a vast array of psychological problems that may be present in members. There is less pressure to be

an expert on the latest technique, method, or theory. Systems thinking offers the best opportunity for clergy to foster healing in their communities by their positioning within each of these three interlocking families. The task is becoming a well-defined individual who is aware of his or her opportunity to indirectly stimulate health in the multigenerational processes of a congregation. Simply put, systems thinking allows leaders to apply themselves as authentic persons in any given situation thereby increasing the overall functioning of everyone involved, and less as specialists and technicians who are expected to fix problems.

Implications of Seeing the Whole

Psychiatrist Mansell Pattison was one of the first to appreciate the power of systems as applied to pastoral ministry. He was not a Bowen follower, but gleaned his insight more directly from general systems theory and organizational studies. He spends considerable space in *Pastor and Parish* describing the tension and subtlety of being in the system and yet not becoming swallowed or defined by the system or succumbing to the temptation of cutting-off from it: "The pastor does not operate from outside the system. The pastor does not speak to the system...On the contrary, the pastor can present himself or herself as simply one member, with assets and limitations, who will contribute to the whole" (Pattison, 1977, p. 64). This does not happen automatically but over time. A leader cannot expect to be perceived as a member of the community within a short time. Indeed, it takes at least three years to pass through the necessary phases of acceptance and negotiation to become a fully invested and trusted

member (Stevens & Collins, 1993, p. 10). Additionally a leader must not be too driven by her own agenda or task orientation as to push and coerce a congregation forward. An effective systems leader must be dedicated to leading from a strong position inside the system as a patient but well-defined person.

Defining Leadership in the System

Effective leadership is neither a “big-headed” role in relation to the “body” of the church nor a “morphed into the body” role. Both are common mistakes. The “big-headed” pastor is one who overfunctions and may be dominant. The congregational body of such a leader may do fairly well in times of duress or when the people are in particular need of safety or security. To keep the congregation intact, the leader may use a need or a cause or something or someone to oppose to stabilize followers. The followers of such a leader may be passive and more clones than robust followers. On the other end of the spectrum, a leader who is “morphed into the body” presents a threat to strong individuals in the congregation who are accustomed to wielding power and control. In this scenario the leader is more invested into the emotional safety of the group and desires to “keep everyone together” at the expense of forward progress. An obstinate member may hold the congregation hostage in this state where peace is valued above all else.

It is evident in these simplified scenarios (the charisma and consensus polarities) how leaders and congregations coauthor their systems together by reinforcing behaviors and unintentionally attracting less than healthy members.

Differentiation and Leadership

Differentiation refers more to a process than to a goal that can ever be achieved. (To say, “I differentiated” from my wife, my child, my parent, etc. proves that the speaker does not understand the concept). It refers to a direction in life rather than a state of being, to the capacity of taking a stand in an intense emotional system, to saying “I” when others are demanding “we” to containing one’s reactivity to the reactivity of others (which includes the ability to avoid being polarized), to maintaining a non-anxious presence in the face of anxious others. It refers, as well, to knowing where one ends and another begins, to be able to cease automatically being one of the systems emotional dominoes, to being clear about one’s own personal values and goals, to taking maximum responsibility for one’s own emotional being and destiny rather than blaming others or the context: culture, gender, or environmental forces (Friedman, 1985, pp. 228 – 230).

Friedman is clear to distinguish self-differentiation from common ideas like “communicating vision” and “having good people skills” or being a good manager. Differentiation is more about the emotional maturity of the leader and his or her ability to respond to the congregation as *it is* and take it forward by less direct means than “taking charge” but more direct than merely “facilitating.” A leader in this model is required to remain vulnerable to others while simultaneously sustaining accountability to vision. It is a tension between the extremes of personal influence and collective consensus.

It is an emotional concept, not a cerebral one, but it does require clear-headedness. And it has enormous consequence for new ways of thinking about leadership. But it is a lifetime project with no one ever getting more than seventy percent of the way to the goal (ibid).

Leadership then, is a natural, organic function of the leader and less a function of technical skill or “people skills;” more about clearly defined positions than persuasive power or eloquence; more about remaining connected to the system and less about

manipulating or changing the resistant. Leadership through self-differentiation “eliminates the leverage of the dependent; it reduces conflict of wills; and it accomplishes these without increasing the potential for cloning” (ibid, p. 231).

Leading More Playfully

Over-seriousness in a group locks it up, making it less able to adapt, improve, and grow. Imagination and creativity, as well as relational closeness and support thrive in an environment of playfulness and joy rather than in an atmosphere of absolutist action and thinking. Bowen and Friedman both employ the idea of playfulness into their theories as a way of introducing the necessary element of paradoxical intervention. A system that is defined by over-seriousness provides the necessary elements for volatility, regardless of the content of the conflicts in play. The paradox is that working on relationships requires the appropriate amount of seriousness and attention, but so often the focus of attention on the problem creates chronic anxiety that makes the orientation of the members of the system more of a problem than “the problem.” Friedman speaks of “flexible distance” and “paradoxical intervention” (Friedman, 1985, p. 51) as a way of turning into the skid rather than out of it. Speaking to overly-intent and serious people in a relaxed and even humorous way is a strategy for diffusing noxious emotional fumes with fresh air. The point is not to be funny, disrespectful or harshly sarcastic, but to challenge under-functioning individuals to reclaim their lives as well as to calm and redirect over-functioning individuals to allow the less responsible to

fail if necessary. Acute anxiety tends to produce extreme thinking and ultimatums.

Playfulness seeks to diffuse fear and create a friendly climate for creative possibilities.

Playfulness as a systems orientation is the ability to manage one's own anxiety in the context of a group, not by matching other's intensity with intensity, but by remaining open to new possibilities that may unfold in the process. If a leader can allow others to process feelings and anxiety without reactivity, typically the "stuck-together" group will rise to the level of the leader in its ability to express itself without becoming toxic and rigid.

Strategies for Becoming Clearheaded

Pattison (1977) accurately summarizes the confusion surrounding the role of a pastor by asking:

Is the pastor an administrator, fund-raiser, preacher, prophet, teacher? Is the pastor a parent-surrogate for surly children, an unrequited-love object for lonely people, a holy stand-in for worldly people? Should the pastor be a symbolic model of virtue, an underpaid salve to people's conscience, a virtuoso demagogue of mustard-seed faith, or simply the person next door who is doing his or her thing for community betterment (p. 48)?

Family systems theorists who work with pastors and congregations (Friedman, 1985, Parsons & Leas, 1993, Pattison, 1977, Steinke, 1993, Stevens & Collins, 1993) are unanimous in their assertion that the answer to this question of pastoral role is clear: It is to "shepherd the subsystems of the congregation" (Stevens & Collins, 1993, p. 47). The pastoral role is primarily shaped by the pastor's systemic identity within the

congregation. “For pastors, doing and being go together. And pastoral care is care of the *church* as a living system” (Pattison, 1977, p.50). Leading the subsystems of the church entails paying attention to these principles:

1. Cultivate interdependence among members. Members, along with their leader must rediscover the lost art of joining. It must be acknowledged that everyone is a part of the system, that each member has chosen to participate in the life of the church and that this fact carries rights and responsibilities to every person. The leader is aware of emotional triangles and skilled in helping the most anxious members by being logical and clear and not taking on anxiety. The leader cultivates interdependence among members by maintaining awareness of the difference between leading the process and leading the people. This means to make decisions, engage the culture of the congregation, and clearly define self and one’s dreams for the church. It is less about making changes organizationally and more about making changes systemically (Stevens & Collins, 1993, p. 128).
2. Avoid becoming triangled. The most dependent in a system are often wielding the most influence. De-triangling and self-differentiating turns the tables on this tendency because the leader is no longer trying to change his or her followers but concentrating on where he or she is going. The need of the followers to belong now shifts toward following rather than to control or claim the victim’s role. Their power has been diminished and they must make decisions and define themselves. Remaining free from unhealthy emotional triangles involves keeping relationships separate, equal and open (Bowen, 1978, p. 473). It is

understanding immaturity while not siding with it. Through the use of directness, conversations center on the relationship between two people and not on a non-present third party. It is the habit of asking oneself, “Do I primarily talk to people about my relationship with them directly or do I talk to people about my relationships with non-present others?”

3. Define mission and direction clearly. Systems leaders are not sales-persons trying to get people to “buy in” to their ideas. Rather they remind the congregation of who they are and what they have mutually committed to and what the implications of these choices are. Systems leadership is not autonomous individuality nor is it subservient mollification. It is forward movement while connecting the subsystems to each other and to an overarching, mutually agreed-to vision of the future. It is seeing “into” the body to see correspondences and not just “at” it to see individual members and activities (Stevens & Collins, 1993, p. 130).

One's Own Voice

As someone who served as a pastor for over twenty years I relate to the challenges of helping people become more interdependent, avoiding triangling, and defining myself clearly and consistently. Becoming a well-positioned leader is about searching out for oneself what one believes about life and acting decisively on one's convictions. When we seek to dominate because we are unsure of ourselves or equivocate because we are unsure of ourselves, we keep our churches in a state of perpetual emotional infancy. The only way to grow up is to lead ourselves and our people through an acute and painful process of change.

One of the factors that contributes to the gawkiness and lack of coordination in adolescents is that they are passing through puberty. Growing up as a leader is also a process of gaining strength in our muscles, giving our brains and emotions time to catch up with our lengthening limbs and to become familiar with and attuned to our own bodies. Perhaps, when the cracks and squeaks have all been worked out of our developing vocal chords, we will one day discover that we have clearly and confidently come to recognize the sound of our own voice.

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