

## Chapter 3. Framework 2: Family Systems Perspectives

Some church community narratives may not resonate with a typical cultural description as the issues may not be to do with the interpretation of sacred or cherished artefacts or the violation of norms that have devolved over long time periods. These stories portray a more volatile dynamic that beg for a sensitivity to the relational bonds between the characters in these systems regardless of their implications at the conscious values level or unconscious assumption level of the church. Some stories of churches portray a perpetual sense of oppressiveness, a reluctance for the community to enact normal defensive measures, of power dynamics of deference to aggressive agents or the suppression of individuality. An equally important consideration would be to discern the nature of the emotional transactions that are occurring within that group and the positional power dynamic allowed to develop within the group.

In the last two decades there has been a body of accessible literature interpreting church conflict and distress through a Family Systems Theory lens. In a way similar to the cultural lens described above, this lens seeks also to probe beneath the superficial and manifest data of a community life to a level of understanding of the patterns of interaction that have developed within a group over time. However, whereas the cultural lens attributes the development of culture to functional benefits conveyed by a pattern of interaction that eventually become obscured at the level of assumptions. Here the issues are not the issues, so much as preconscious attempts to relieve emotional anxiety. This need to relieve anxiety is 'solved' either in healthy, individualizing, life affirming ways or, through messy and constricting ways, primarily by the apportioning of roles within the group. These roles are akin to the positions

individuals take up within a typical nuclear family. This framework implicates the analyst in the making of clinical judgments as to the helpfulness or harmfulness of those arrangements for inter and intra-personal well being. Although this frame does not provide an exhaustive analysis of all the depths of organizational life it is easily the primary framework upon which church consultation and intervention relies and deserves to be reviewed for that reason alone.

### ***Bowen Family Systems Theory Foundations***

Many writers acknowledge their indebtedness to the work of family systems counsellor and Rabbi, Edwin H Friedman (1985) who was the first to apply the analytical method of Murray Bowen's family systems theory to the context of the faith community. He proposed that this was a valid transference as the church family bore the same characteristics of health or distress as the family. While Bowen attempts an entirely naturalistic and biological explanation for anxiety processing patterns within individuals in relationship, Friedman focuses more specifically on the corollaries of tension in relationships within the religious community setting.

Much of the literature produced within the Christian context for Church application, is indebted to Edwin Friedman (Stephens and Collins : 1993, Steinke: 1993, 1996, Pappas: 1995, Lewis: 1997,) and others or their forerunner Bowen family theory itself (Bowen:1988, Cosgrove and Hatfield: 1984, Richardson: 1986, Leas and Parsons: 1988, Boers: 1999, Herrington et.al 2003). These writers also share a tendency to down play the actual theological content issues in the interest of focusing upon the inter-relational aspects of conflicts and dysfunctional church 'family systems'. The issues are not the issues.

Families and churches are both emotional systems of entangled relationships. Flexibility is synonymous with health. Rigidity is synonymous with emotionally immature ways of handling anxiety. These systems erupt around issues when the whole anxiety in the system is out of balance and people or subunits in the system are struggling with the variables of individuality/togetherness (Richardson: 1996, 159). Churches like families actually camouflage these imbalances through defocusing, especially upon the pastor or other key leaders' performance in areas such as the pastor's attention to visitation, preaching ability or spouses role or behaviour. These indicate a 'continuing malignant process' within the congregation (Friedman: 1985, 207) and often are the ways that leaders are dealing their own anxiety within their own families of origin onto the pastor.

Relationship systems, including church communities, easily become prey to their own anxiety levels in the face of such poorly differentiated, highly anxious agents, either by avoiding confronting them or their intrusive behaviour, or, becoming fixated and triangulated with others about the 'difficult customer' within the congregation. Such approaches only entrench and compound anxiety (Steinke: 1993, 25) and, at the same time lower the 'differentiation' level of the individuals who accommodate the anxious behaviour in such an unproductive way. The relationship system becomes less flexible as people who would not normally be close are brought closer through their common repulsion toward a highly anxious or intrusive personality within the system and communication patterns become distorted as boundaries are raised between those enmeshed with each other.

Family systems theory also has an explanation for the human family's capacity for cohesiveness, altruism and cooperativeness. Specifically, the theory attempts to account for the variability in these properties between families. The higher the level of differentiation of people in a family or other social group, the more they can cooperate, look out for one

another's welfare, and stay in adequate contact during stressful as well as calm periods. The lower the level of differentiation, the more likely the family, when stressed, will regress to selfish, aggressive, and avoidance behaviours; cohesiveness, altruism and cooperativeness will break down. (Bowen and Kerr: 1988, 93).

Bowen Family Systems Theory has not received wide acceptance within the psychoanalytic community, as, unlike psychodynamic theories, Family Systems Theory does not seek to supply a primal or developmental explanation for dysfunction in the group from the psych of certain influential members. Instead, Bowen theory stresses the nature of dysfunction as a collusive factor, whereby otherwise healthy families or relational groupings fail to resist the intrusive and corrosive impact of 'pathological' agents, to use Friedman's term, within their midst. Bowen theory introduced into the consultant's vernacular key concepts such as the differentiation of self as the key depiction of emotional maturity, the role of emotional triangles as the cause of rigidity within the system, the attribution of neuroses in children to family projection processes, the phenomenon of emotional cut off from family in later life. Moreover the anxiety within a system that makes for dysfunctional responses is attributed to multi-generational transmission processes of anxious responses. Sibling positions within the system are explained as over-, or under-functioning behaviour whereby one character takes on more or less responsibility than is their own for the sake of the homeostasis of the system that develops resulting in some being repeatedly cornered into roles such as an 'identified patient' or 'identified burnout' victim. Family systems theory also attributes societal regression toward infantile responses as a response triggered by total system anxiety.

The ideal family and by extrapolation the ideal church relational family, would be one where individuals were able to be growing in personal 'differentiation' as a measure of personal and interpersonal maturity. That is they would have the capacity to remain close to

each other while maintaining their most cherished opinions, their intra personal anxieties kept at a manageable level or resolved through open, non-aggressive dialogical processes. Differentiated people can remain relationally connected without compromising their deepest values that reflect the uniqueness of their real selves. They can permit the expression of genuine emotionality as well in others not being threatened by the anxieties and rigidities in others as they have the ability to know the difference between their own thinking and feeling (Herrington et al: 2003, 18).

Friedman and Bowen hold that, two variables are at work in tandem in every emotional system affecting its capacity to function. One is the level of emotional maturity or differentiation of the people within the system and of the leadership in particular. The other is the level of anxiety and tension to which the particular system is subject at any given time. Regardless of the burning nature of diverse views of God for which the church contends, the interpersonal combat is usually between leadership and the 'overly anxious' who exert an undue degree of influence upon the emotional state of the group and its freedom to respond naturally to environmental demands. Those affected tend to handle their own anxiety through 'triangulation' with others. This not only enmeshes them with the receivers of their grievances, but also traps the highly anxious within a rigid position as the identified victim within the group. The more mature a group, that is the less rigid and more emotionally mature it is the better equipped it is to handle the level of emotional maturity when the anxiety reaches peak 'spikes' in times of crises and conflict. Herein lies the critical system function of the leader within the church family system. Our needs for others, or other's approval can easily lead us to become so intent on keeping the others in the system calm that our personal or corporate mission is compromised (Herrington: 2003, 41).

As regards viewing churches as families, this theory would trace sporadic hostility and other community damaging dysfunction back to the physiological level of thinking within the mind of the most anxious person in the group. In fact, the most anxious person may become more powerful than the official leaders within a group (Stephens: 1988, 174). The most hostile person's attacks represent thinking that stems from the 'more primitive' prefrontal or inner cortex of the individual brain of the 'difficult' individual (Bowen and Kerr: 1988, 93,94, Steinke, 1993: 15-17) as well as other aspects of the human nervous system that enables the togetherness force of 'empathy', the capacity to gain insight into the feelings of others and the capacity to reflect upon one's own thoughts. While entirely conceived from biological evolutionary presuppositions, and while stressing the similarities between human species and the rest of the animal kingdom, Bowen concedes that ...

Despite these familiar breakdowns in human social organization, however, human beings probably have more capacity than any other mammal to maintain social integrity under stressful as well as calm conditions. This ability appears to exist, at least in part because of the capacity for differentiation of self, an evolutionary development that is presumably unique to human beings. Differentiation of self may be another important factor that helped reverse the one-billion year antisocial trend in evolution. (Bowen and Kerr: 1988, 94)

Friedman likened the emotional processes at work within individual biological families to those within churches and suggested that clergy, like family 'parents', can enable their churches to function in healthier ways and resolve dysfunctional behaviour within their churches through a process of 'self differentiation'. A correct 'diagnosis' of a dysfunctional church system and its consequent resolution depend not only on the individual leader's

functioning within that system, but also their degree of self differentiation within their own family system, particularly with regard to the influence of previous generations.

Friedman does not totally ignore the significance of the particular worldview of the church or pastor upon the health of their flock. The distinct variable that sets the clergy work place apart from other human systems is the theological context manifest in the shared worldview and value system of the church family members.

Doctors lawyers and politicians are affected by their belief systems, but the work of the clergy is belief systems. Since beliefs are the essence of the self, to the extent that we work to gain differentiation in our families of origin, we directly affect the context of our professional existence. (Friedman:1985, 195).

However, he is not interested in the actual content of the beliefs so much as the way the belief structure is held assertively as an explanation for healthy community.

According to Friedman, it is not particularly helpful to simply locate causes of church conflict within a pastor's individual psyche as if to suggest the problems of the system are problem personalities. Understanding problems only in terms of personality 'exonerates' the system for its failings (Friedman: 1985, 218). It is the combination of the pastor's own family of origin tensions impacting with those already existing in the church that fuels the levels of conflict that arise. Such an approach affects the way a pastor would attempt to resolve interpersonal problems. As with biological families, a diachronic understanding of how interpersonal problems have been passed down through generations is necessary. Splits and revolts, triangles and rigidities get passed down from one generation to the next in both kinds of families These can still be active forces within a present congregation, handed down from generation to generation as with the family side equivalent, despite the changing of a pastor or

new leadership. A new leader does not equate with a new parent in a family. Such a role must be earned by the relative adherence to the leader by the existing "children" within the church family<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, a congregation born out of a fellowship split may manifest an ongoing tendency to keep splitting in later generations since it has never recovered from what Friedman terms "the still active background radiation from the big bang of that congregation's creation" (Friedman: 1985, 196). Therefore, dialogue with a view to resolving the current presenting issue does not change this underlying system of grievances and anxiety. The issues around which the congregation presently polarizes are most likely to be false issues (Friedman: 1985, 207). Likewise, every time a congregation or key leaders begin to focus on the minister's performance they are more likely dispelling something from their own personal lives but in the context of the alternative and connected family of the church.

Friedman counsels that a pastoral response in a hostile church environment is always the main factor that determines how harmful conflict will be. A 'non - anxious presence' by the leaders will do more to mollify existing anxiety throughout the system than the ability to come up with conclusive and persuasive, content-based solutions (Friedman: 1985, 210). This response stands in contrast with those anxious ministers who tend to 'over-function' taking on responsibility and anxiety for the whole church that is not really theirs. Leaders who believe they are helping the system right itself through taking a more sacrificial role in the name of servanthood are at best offering superficial and temporary 'relief' (Richardson: 1996, 140). Such moves only perpetuate the 'stuckness' of the system and do nothing to redress the triangles and enmeshments within it.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms 'parent' and 'child', not in a value laden or pejorative sense here, but simply as used by these theorists for the relative position of responsibility taken and deference given or received.

According to Friedman, the more a leader attempts to change relationships with enmeshed others within the system the more likely that leader would end up bearing not only their own stress but that which rightfully is the property of the two opponents. Physical stress symptoms are signs that a pastor is taking another's responsibility for their own anxiety and becoming caught up unnecessarily in emotional triangles. Analogous to family dysfunction within the congregation such pastors can easily become the "identified burnout" within the system.

More importantly, the very culture of a high commitment church with deeply held confessions make ideal conditions for dangerous systemic imbalances. The worst possible combinations of work conditions are high performance demands combined with little control over the situation (Friedman: 1985, 216). This certainly, is not unlike the situation usually faced by pastors in the churches in these studies as their tenure in ministry depends solely upon their ongoing performance in the local church, which is in fact to activate the performance of the church. To do this requires an ability to appease the majority tastes and biases and this with no assurance of a call to another church beyond the present. As well, these churches are congregationally governed so the pastor has to be able to persuade the congregation to act in any cohesive manner or move together in one direction. Without such compliance positive missional outcomes and the sense of achievement that comes with them are impossible. It is a well-constructed double bind. It is not surprising then that so many pastors are over-functioning. Moreover, the dysfunctional processes already existing in a congregation resonate adversely with the normal stress reactions of the pastors, thus complicating and compounding the patterns of relationship within the system. This tendency within these situations will inevitably result in the pastor or one or more leaders displaying physiological burnout symptoms as they take up a position known as the "identified burnout" on behalf of the system.

A potentially potent 'cocktail' for such systemic dysfunction would especially be provided in situations where a congregation is isolated from others, even those in its own denomination, or, there was a degree of physical distance between the lay and general leadership. If also the 'lay' leadership allows the congregation to pre-empt its entire emotional life so that they have no strong circle of friends or networks beyond the church family or the leadership has intense relationships beyond their congregational roles, crossing blood lines or relationships reinforced through marriage, or the senior lay leadership, or chairman of elders is unable to take well defined positions independent of the most anxious complainers, the situation would become a potentially unworkable and very risky environment for all but the most differentiated pastor. Friedman also noted the compounding impact of the attitudes and reactions of denominational officials in compounding such unhealthy processes by blaming such crashes on 'pilot error'. Again this only exonerates the system and entrenches the unhealthy patterns of emotional responsibility.

### ***Identifying Symptoms of Dysfunctional Churches***

The theory identifies four symptoms of distress in family systems: conflict, distancing, over-functioning and its correlate under-functioning and triangulation with a third party. These may combine to form distinctly identifiable social-emotional arrangements. Richardson helpfully has discriminated between four basic types of congregation in terms of how they handle conflict, anxiety and the tension between community bonds, emotional closeness and individuation or differentiation of self (Richardson: 1996, 101f). While space does not permit a full description, these two variables, the degree of physical closeness in relationship and the differentiation of the member make for four possible combinations.

Firstly there is the 'Enmeshed' church, where relationships are both close and enmeshed. Here people encroach upon each other's personal responsibility, are overly close and endure suffocating forms of relationship. They only leave themselves room to move or for individuals to become more differentiated by violent reaction.

The second possibility is described as the 'Isolated' church, where relationships are just as enmeshed, but the reactivity in the congregation is expressed in interpersonal physical distance. While appearing to allow individuation, people are actually still emotionally enmeshed with each other and conflicts are not resolved but just beneath the surface.

The third possibility allows for much differentiation and self-expression, but sacrifices closeness for differentiation. This is the 'Alone' church. The prevailing systemic realities may be the consequence of key individuals having acted maturely on the basis of ethical principles but at the expense of relationship closeness (Richardson: 1996, 110).

The only option or field of possibilities that can sustain and permit the flex in natural relational variations, of both closeness and distance and at the same time encourage more differentiated selves, is described as the 'Connected' church. This typology is a useful categorization device illuminating the sorts of dynamics recounted in each story as symptoms of various emotional fields.

Richardson identifies nine critical tell tale signs of churches where the system is rigid, toxic or dysfunctional (Richardson: 1996,159f). They are:

- (i) Lifeless, with little passion for enacting its understanding of the church's calling
- (ii) Continually in turmoil with much unresolved conflict

- (iii) Lacking in clear direction or goals understood cooperatively and worked for by the majority of the congregation
- (iv) A faction or committee who regularly is at odds with the leadership
- (v) A church with an ongoing acrimonious relationship with the denomination
- (vi) A church with distant or low connection between members
- (vii) A church which stifles mature individuality or dissent
- (viii) A church with no known creed or, no set of clearly stated principles for which it exists to promote for the good of its members
- (ix) A church that seems alien within its own social setting in society expressed either through distance or outright hostility toward its surrounding environment.

On the other hand Cosgrove and Hatfield focus upon the types of leader style that induce the sorts of enmeshed church types. They distinguish four types of modern forms of leadership (Cosgrove and Hatfield: 1994, 62-75). These are:

- (i) Paternalism
- (ii) Autonomism
- (iii) Maternalism and
- (iv) Nurturance, the genuine health inducing alternative form of leadership.

Paternalism is a form of domination by a controlling form of caring. It involves an unusually distant form of people management which makes people emotionally dependent upon the 'father' in a way that takes responsibility away from others and keeps them from growing up to their full stature as responsible ministers and members. Although one may espouse egalitarian values or democratic structures, it is the functioning of leaders within these structures that determines the actual family system patterns of authority (Cosgrove and Hatfield: 1994, 66,67). Sometimes conflict in church life may actually be equivalent to teenage like rebellion against such paternalistic practices.

Autonomism is similar in some respects to paternalism. This form of power also aims to control outcomes, but does so without any emotional involvement. Struggles and decisions of others are treated with a detached rationality and resisting any expression of care (Cosgrove and Hatfield:1994, 77-81). Such leaders offer advice in the form of a limited number of mutually exclusive options and with a 'take it or leave it' attitude. It is only possible to effectively induce autonomistic relationships if one possesses real political authority within the system.

Maternalism, conversely, is usually a form of power exerted by those who do not possess formal authority within a system to enact their wishes. They have to act through subsidiary agents acting on their behalf. It is not necessarily a power source enacted by women, although as a result of cultural suppressions women may find this their only source available (Cosgrove and Hatfield; 1994, 81,83). This source of influence therefore is often found together with co-dependent relationships where one who is poorly differentiated seeks to bolster their sagging self worth through becoming indispensable to others. Such behaviour stems from a deep fear of being cut off from others and eventually leads to an addiction to relationships with others. It is not difficult to conceive of such patterns of behaviour being fostered by environments which revolve around the currency of caring ministry. In congregationally governed churches, where pastors in particular have little to no formal authority they may resort to this style of influence as they feel obliged to be amenable to the whims and needs of the whole family.

These four styles however do not necessarily correspond to any of Richardson's four types of emotional field, although there is some resonance between the maternalist leadership

style and the enmeshed church and both 'paternalism' and 'autonomism' would on the surface of it suggest the institution of the 'isolated' church type. The emotional field model really focuses upon the reactions of the groups themselves and that the actual direction of these may not be determined by the particular leadership style of the leader.

### ***Changing the System Toward Health***

A family systems view of congregational transformation assumes naturalistically that potential for the preservation or healing of the group always lies resident within the particular group or congregation. A Christian perspective on church change would want to attribute at least some of the change potential to the Spirit of God's superintending of whatever natural attributes the family system already possesses. Nonetheless, the agency of the Spirit aside, the responsibility of the leader for change takes a distinctive form in family systems approaches. Instead of seeking to focus on presenting issues as ways of bringing about change in a congregation, the leader should attempt to alleviate tension within the system by focusing on his position or functional role within the church 'family'. The leaders' first responsibility is to their own personal health and well-being. A pastor cannot change a church but only can change himself or herself, and help the church change herself (Stephens: 1994 , 179).

Friedman would encourage those parties in conflict to begin its management by positively reframing their experience. The leader must take a non-reactive, clearly conceived and clearly defined position with respect to the demands of the congregation. The ideal position is to stay in touch, especially with the anxious individual, yet remain definite in their convictions. The challenge to others is not only to take up responsibilities but to become self-defined also (Friedman: 1985, 233). Change in the behaviour of one member, especially those with a role that touches many, will evoke change throughout the whole of the family system

since it is likened to a web or, a field of interconnected relationships. Wise change leaders should not only to attempt to differentiate themselves from expectations and avoid triangulation, but at the same time, interpret mindless resistance of the most anxious members as evidence that they have in fact, been functioning well (Friedman: 1985: 224, 229, 231). It is those who are most emotionally dependent upon the leaders who are most likely to actively sabotage the leader's attempt to differentiate themselves within the system or develop a principled stance. Their purpose is to recreate the old enmeshments and unhealthy balances, or in systems terms to maintain the 'homeostatic balance'. These anxious souls are in fact the indicators that the pastor/parent is indeed serving the well being of the whole system as they attend to their own issues.

Consequently, any denominational interventionist must be equally astute to the dynamics of the positions within the system rather than merely react to static events. For one thing, they must not assume conflict means a lack of peace. Some conflict may actually be the road to a freer, more health-inducing system. It is this change that the most change resistant or highly anxious are attempting to sabotage. This theory would imply that an interventionist must diagnose accurately which persons should be encouraged to change not on the basis of formal role descriptions but on the basis of the relative functional role the individual performs for the particular church family system (Cosgrove and Hatfield: 1994, 125-127). A family systems approach reminds one that a single leader cannot change the system from a detached objective external vantage point. One has to join the system, emotionally, experiencing the ramifications of the anxiety build up within the system, in order to change the system.

It is not uncommon for those interventionists to find that the issues they are presented with in conflict resolution actually mask the real issues. The system they enter already has developed the skills of shutting down communication in the face of fearful threat to the existing

homeostatic balance. The best interventions then would be those which coax and coach the whole membership to 'fight' cleanly and openly (Boers: 1999).

Friedman maintains that the leader's position within the congregational family is more important than his personality or style of leadership. He explicitly refutes style theories of leadership, specifically a mental model of the charisma-consensus continuum of leadership, as too one-dimensional. A leader who perseveres and clearly articulates the direction in which the family is heading rather than react to the reactivity of followers is more likely to reduce the intensity of anxiety within the system rather than add to the resonance effect of increasing disturbance. In the hustle of ongoing demands and pressures upon pastors, the tyranny of the urgent may distract the pastor from these foundational roles or from discerning the patterns of relationships for which the problems they face in the moment are only symptoms.

Other critical roles then for the pastor would be to discern the patterns of communication within the church system and to open up those boundaries which filter or distort the communication (Cosgrove and Hatfield: 1994, 127, 129). The most crucial revolution that must happen is the revolution in the mental model of the politically attuned leader. Systems theorists remind us that we must think not in terms of individual pathologies but system dislocations. Any political change therefore must be achieved with the nurturing of the whole system in mind, not for short term overcoming of resistant others. But in terms reminiscent of organizational culture theorists, they remind us that any approach that the leaders adopt uncritically quickly becomes the cultural pattern for the whole family.

## ***Biblical Theology and a Critique of the Family Systems Model***

This perspective has the advantage of allowing us to discern the basic outlines of distinct yet similar stories of dysfunction and health thus enabling comparisons to be made across the diversity plots and characters. A less analytical approach would divert attention from decline as a systemic indicator of dysfunction and view it as if it were the inevitable result of certain typical sorts of issues, such as changes of worship style, leadership style, theological opinions and so forth.

As regards the revitalization of churches, it would appear that the primary focus of such models would place an unduly large degree of explanation for the complexity of the process upon the church 'parent's' capacity to lower their level of over functioning; to become more differentiated, less anxious persons. Likewise, it would appear to attribute the cause of periods of stagnation, decline, or distress to the times when overly anxious people were allowed their pathological 'by play' through the lack of differentiation or maturity of over-functioning 'rescuer' figures. If conflict erupted it is a matter of an anxious reaction to a disturbance of the system's equilibrium. It would not be attributed to the fact that some member had misused the sacred symbols or the tenets of the community's faith. Conversely, if joy abounded in a new era, that this would not be attributed to a culturally sensitive missionary leader, resonating with values that were deep and strong within the strong culture. What people do in response to the anxiety of the group, by their own differentiated maturity is sufficient to explain the renewal of life giving forces that rejuvenates the church as a "family system".

Another feature that this model underplays, by contrast with the beliefs and values concerns of cultural analysis, are the theological or ideological elements underpinning group life. Consequently, this approach has been criticized in recent times, especially since

Friedman's recent death (Lowe: 1999). It is difficult to conceive that the foundational beliefs and commitments that a group holds dear would have no relevance to their capacity or willingness to address the pathological features or persons within their 'family system'. I have argued elsewhere<sup>2</sup> that, as others have noted, some God Images may be more or less helpful in the promotion of healthy initiative and responsibility. It is easy to go one step further and conceive that certain views of God's working in the church world may correlate directly with an understanding of the leader/parent role within a church family. In turn, reactions by leaders or followers permit pathological agents and patterns to become entrenched in the life of the church family through supplying a rationale for parental, under or over functioning.

However, this is not to imply that the family systems contribution as a whole does not have some correspondence with a Biblical world-view.<sup>3</sup> Taking the metaphors of the church as 'family', 'body' and 'bride' Paul Stephens has noted some striking correspondences between the Pauline ideals of redeemed community and healthy systems. Believers are incorporated through the work of Christ into the family of God but in a manner conducive to individual differentiation.

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<sup>2</sup> See my Theol. M. thesis, "The Residual Impact of Trauma in a Pastor's Sense of Call", *Melbourne College of Divinity*, 2000. I researched pastors who had experienced a terminated call from their pastorates and found that their capacity for renewal after the trauma directly related to their degree of over-functioning style of behaviour and the helpfulness of their God image as either, a needy, a testing God or, One who could not be trusted.

<sup>3</sup> The creation story (Genesis 1 & 2) and the pre-historic prelude to the human community (Genesis 3-11) depicts what it is to be human in terms of an inter-relational capacity. Being in the image of God is 'being with'. The pinnacle of creation is allowed a role analogous to that of God, symbolized in naming and ordering their world and finding appropriate partners by a process of discovery. To be human then is to have the freedom to choose an appropriate level of interpersonal emotional closeness and distance from other church family members. After mistrust intrudes into the relationship with God distortion results in the interpersonal sphere of human community. The very placing of individuals within the confines of family is an aspect of creation orderliness. Closeness to others and distance from others take on neurotic dimensions as a dysfunctional need to dominate and control as in the story of Babylonian aggrandizement (Genesis 11) or, fleeing the other due to a fear of engulfment by God and others. The source of idolatry could be attributed to the reactive choices to assert ones autonomy through creating a distance between oneself and God, or, conversely to submit to the Others' closeness, resulting in a fear of being smothered and having one's identity suffocated by the demands of the Other. It is the balance between these competing demands - between the need to define one's self and to touch and be touched emotionally by others - that affects the capacity for faith communities to find a flexible and healthy balance where human differentiation and authenticity can be nurtured.

God differentiates himself from his sons and daughters and facilitates their differentiation from one another. So the Christian believer is neither absorbed into God nor merged with other believers. The church has a rich, mysterious, social unity that incorporates the differences among its member peoples (Eph. 3.4-6). (Stephens: 1999, 174)

In the same way, the motif of the church as body also implies an interdependence of a health giving holistic kind. For Paul, the body of Christ involves

... remaining connected while expressing uniqueness. Paul held these in dynamic tension: “there are different kinds of gifts” (1Cor.12.4) ... and “each one for the common good” (12.7). The context of his repudiation of interdependence (“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’”-12.21) is both the unity of the body (“now you are the body of Christ”) and the diversity of its membership (“and each of you is a part of it”-12.27). Paul was as opposed to the merging of members ... as he was to selfish independence. (Stephens: 1994).

As with the Old Testament Covenant making God, the new relationship with God’s people makes them God’s bride. This covenant is irrevocable in both its Old and New Testament forms (Ex 19.5, Hos 2.19, 3.1. Jer 30.22, 2Cor 2.12ff). And this has remarkable analogies in the fact that divorce and death in family systems do not annul the emotional ties of the members (Stephens. 179).

Stephens also questions the depth of the analogy between family systems theory and the Biblical vision. As already mentioned, he notes the naturalistic presuppositions tend to make humanity just a more developed form of mammal.

The fundamental assumption of the Bowen systems theory is that two variables control all family processes: differentiation and anxiety. ... But a fully biblical perspective views disorders such as anxiety as symptoms of a more fundamental disharmony. In Romans 1:18-23 the sins of idolatry and futile thinking (anxiety) are symptoms and expressions of the root sin of irreverence and ingratitude (1.21). Anxiety may be one expression of this root disharmony, but only one. And redemption is not something humankind can achieve. The process of differentiation of self, however, may be one of these dimensions of co-creativity with God where we work in harmony with God in an environment of grace, whether that grace is acknowledged to be from God or not. (Stephens: 1999, 179)

We may extrapolate this notion of correlation and co-creativity to the capacity for a congregation to change its self from a hostile, depressing culture to one that is vital and hopeful. This would suggest that to the extent that congregations consciously adopt a more adequate understanding of the fundamentally theological issues such as the nature of God, sin forgiveness and grace that the systemic symptoms and disorders may be addressed. That is, the system is to be seen as an indicator of even deeper spiritual realities.

The features of the theory that are inherent compatible with a Biblical world-view would suggest that those communities of faith could consciously take the Creation or New Creation motifs as mandates for self-evaluation and adjustment of their conscious life together in communities. If indeed it is the primary stories of faith through which the vision of an ideal faith community are derived, to the extent that these creation/redemption narratives are foundational to the self understanding and self-esteem of the wider membership, to that extent there would be a capacity for the group to be self aware and self renewing. Where such a vision was lacking or unformed one would suspect that many dysfunctions at a systemic level

would likewise go unnamed and undetected. A wise pastor who could discern the loss of the Biblical vision, who could continuously remind the church of their true revealed identity and clarify the purposes of the church in the light of the salvation story, would indeed enhance the functioning of the group. Systems theory would suggest to the extent that the leadership consistently modelled that vision in their interpersonal reactions the system would become healthier.

We note again that the family systems theorist does not place great store in the actual content of the faith of the church family members to vitally influence the well being of the family system. Whether this can be maintained in the light of the data of the churches in this study remains to be seen. It would be unlikely that in a community whose business is the sustaining of life, that there would not be some correlation between the contours of the narratives of faith and the narratives of community distress or renewal.

### ***Reading Family Systems in Narratives***

Again in this study we are hoping to discern which lenses have a heuristic capacity to make sense of the themes within the stories told of these churches. If the family systems lens supplied the critical insight that resonated with the nature of the phenomena of these 'turn-around' churches, then one would expect to see some evidence whereby the key figures, the most anxious individuals, ceased to misbehave, manipulate, smother or tyrannize the churches. Moreover this should be associated with some family systems 'parent' figure, whether the official 'leader' or pastor or not, taking a non-anxious stance, confronting the pattern of dysfunction without violence or aggression.

Friedman maintained that the emotional field of a pastor's biological family is inextricably connected to the emotionality of the church family. Anxiety within one and unresolved issues between parent and children, flow from one into the other unchecked. Therefore, another theme may manifest itself in the plot lines of the stories gathered, especially within those divulged by the leaders. That is, the leader lowering the dysfunctional anxiety within the church, coincident with a conscious attempt to become a more differentiated self within one's own biological family. Such co-incidences would be strong arguments for putting aside either the presenting issues as affecting the value system of the church viewed as a culture, or an issues centred approach, that would interpret the actions of the major players in moral, ethical or theological terms instead of as systemic variables or symptoms of dysfunction.

In light of the theory exposed above if family systems theory really does possess a strong salience with the sorts of culture change reflected in these stories of decline or decline and renewal then we could posit that certain systemic features would also be discernable from the recollected stories that lend themselves to a family systems functional analysis.

In summary, the downward or dysfunctional cycle should be characterized by certain core symptoms particularly:

- (i) Conflict that is endemic and unresolved, including splits and pain that is passed down from one generation of church and pastor to the next diachronically
- (ii) Distancing in relationships as a way of soothing anxiety
- (iii) Reciprocal relationships involving the over-functioning of a few or, a leader in particular with the under-functioning of the many
- (iv) Triangulation as a means of dealing with anxieties and conflicts

- (v) The projection of one's own anxieties onto others with the possible secondary manifestation of an Identified Burnout in the form of a character or leader.

Moreover, during the down cycle of dysfunction there would tend to be patterns of social arrangements whereby the distance versus differentiation tension reached a systemic equilibrium. Richardson's taxonomy of four types of system is pertinent here. The emotional field in which the church finally comes to rest should be solving that universal tension in a more adequate less enmeshed way in the upward cycle.

Other leadership-induced cultures associated with these fields may include stories depicting:

- (i) A loss of playfulness or humourlessness
- (ii) A lack of creativity and clarity of vision from the leadership beset with reacting to immediate crises with quick fix thinking
- (iii) High pressure for conformity in thinking
- (iv) A tendency to react to systemic problems by the blaming of individuals
- (v) A political culture where communication is filtered for effect and acceptance or,
- (vi) Leadership that aims to control, dominate or inflict uniformity by the various dysfunctional methods; 'patriarchy', 'matriarchy' and 'autonomism'.

Conversely, a church on the upswing of renewal would presumably be characterized by plots that reveal:

- (i) The dissolution of the family distress symptoms above
- (ii) A shift from one of the three dysfunctional emotional 'quadrants' towards one enabling a higher degree of interpersonal closeness without compromising personal differentiation,

- (iii) An ability to resolve crises patiently and less reactively, where underlying causes are teased out rather than reactivity directed toward surface symptoms, especially discontent,
- (iv) Some conflict may persist but this could be identified as the province of the most anxious member(s) attempting to sabotage the change in the emotional system following on from differentiated actions of the leader.
- (v) Leadership which is differentiated and unthreatened by difference taking a consistent stand on principles or the espoused mission of the church
- (vi) Leadership attending to their own growth, especially through attending to unresolved family of origin issues.
- (vii) Church political processes where decisions are made through open dialogical processes; where difference doesn't result in distance but an acceptance of consensus. The overall result would show a liveliness and initiative flowing from a clarity of vision regarding the real mission of the particular congregation.

By the same token, plot features where these indicators are out of place would negate the validity of Family Systems Theory as a heuristic model for understanding organizational change. For instance a differentiated leader may be associated with the down cycle or a matriarchal leadership pattern with the change into a renewed period of church life. The usefulness of this frame would be nullified by a contradictory sample of evidence in the majority of narratives accounted.

The family systems model of group change is, similarly to the cultural lens, dealing with invisible and internal forces and shared perceptions. But it is more concerned with the inter-personal transactions and positions, for which the cultural symbols are mere pretexts and opportunities for a loss or gain of authentic selfhood. It involves a rational rather than pre-

rational psychoanalytic explanation for behaviour. Unlike the even more intricate devices discussed below, the “issues may not be the issues”, but the issues can be explained by the patterns of distancing, triangulation and emotional closeness that have developed within the church as it is. We need look no further than to detect who was changing position in the church family and whose quest for differentiation was being sabotaged. It is pertinent then to ask the question of conflicts which are seemingly out of proportion to the issues involved, "Why now?" One would therefore be more alerted to the pertinence of a family systems lens when the artefacts, actions or processes involved, had little or no cultural, or symbolic value. The next lens by way of distinction views the issues and events as meaningful and vital indicators of transactions between members and their church culture for preconscious ends.