Assessing Self and Ecclesial Contexts Through Family Systems Constructs: Why it is so Critically Important To Doctor of Ministry Education.

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Abstract: This paper demonstrates that engaging the writings of family systems theorists Murray Bowen, Edwin H. Friedman, Michael E. Kerr, Peter L. Steinke, and Ronald W. Richardson and employing key family systems concepts when designing, implementing, and evaluating Doctor of Ministry projects will enhance their quality.

This paper argues that all Doctor of Ministry programs should require their students to employ family systems constructs when designing, implementing, and evaluating their final projects in order to assess both themselves and their ecclesial contexts because not to do so assumes both students and faculty will miss important systemic issues embedded in their ecclesial contexts.

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses three specific areas where systems theory is particularly germane to Doctor of Ministry education and research and is thus divided into the following three sections. The first section, *Assessing the Whole System*, addresses the need for Doctor of Ministry students to do substantive systemic assessment of their ecclesial contexts prior to crafting a Doctor of Ministry final project. The second section, *Critically Assessing Oneself and One's Position in the System*, addresses the need for D. Min. students to assess themselves and their "position" critically in their respective systems both before and during their projects. The third and final section, *Evaluating the Final Project*, addresses how family systems theory offers both students and faculty helpful and valuable tools in the evaluation of final Doctor of

Ministry projects.

PART I--ASSESSING THE WHOLE SYSTEM

Part I has nine sub-sections–most with a relevant case study: A) Systemic History Taking; B) Assessing A System's Capacity for Change; C) The Critical Role of Anxiety; D) Assessing Systemic Anxiety; E) Defining Resistance and Homeostasis; F) Assessing Resistance and Homeostasis; G) Addressing Resistance and Homeostasis Paradoxically and Playfully; and H) What Well-differentiated Leadership Ideally Looks Like; I) Over-functioning and Under-functioning.

A. Systemic History Taking:

Because ecclesial research does not occur in a vacuum, when preparing to design, implement, and ultimately evaluate a Doctor of Ministry project there is no substitute for taking a thorough contextual history. One of the cornerstones of thorough systemic assessment is the capacity of the Doctor of Ministry student to be acutely observational. The discipline of congregational studies offers Doctor of Ministry students and faculty helpful observational tools or "frames" which describe systemic contextual structures and issues of interest to family systems theorists. Although these "frames" are not family systems constructs per se, they complement discerning systemic contexts. The following five congregational "frames" noted in Studying Congregations: A New Handbook by Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney are very helpful tools that enhance systemic assessment.[1]

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[1] Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney, Studying Congregations: A New Handbook, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998),14-16.

The five helpful "frames," by which a systemic assessment can be conducted are: 1) **Ecological**–how the congregation both affects its environment and is affected by it, 2) **Cultural**–a congregation's identity or "personality"–its documents, web page, stories, myths, symbols, jargon, jokes, rituals, work, play, habits, sacred objects and places, 3) **Resources**–a congregation's raw materials or potential capital to do ministry which includes its reputation, money, assets, buildings, spiritual energies, history, and connections in the community, 4) **Process**–the knowledge that insiders understand to be normative–the underlying flow and dynamics of a congregation that knit together its common life and shape its morale and climate, and 5) **Gender**–how a congregation's life and ministry is systemically shaped around the roles of both women and men. This frame pays attention to voices of both sexes and notices ways in which congregations both knowingly and unknowingly empower, marginalize, or silence certain voices.

The "cash value"[2] of this kind of systemic assessment and history taking is that it opens up the multi-layered narratives embedded in the system. It helps the community name both its overt and covert stories–both light and shadow stories. It often uncovers "secrets," and gives marginalized persons a voice. It also provides insights into a congregation's unique "quirks" as the following case study will demonstrate.

<u>Case Study</u>: **The Importance of Systemic History Taking**.

Several years ago I moved from serving a church in rural Georgia to a church on

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[2] Seward Hiltner, "cash value" was a phrase employed often by Hiltner's when teaching his Project Methodology Course. This phrase is synonymous with "practical value." Class notes.

Long Island, NY. Having lived in the rural south for thirteen years and then moving to New York heightened my awareness of how culture affects a congregation and its "personality." My wife and I were quite accustomed to being invited over for dinner at parishioners' homes each Sunday after worship, but when we moved to a part of Long Island (which is more like New England than New York) the invitations dried up. We chalked it up to the difference between "southern hospitality" and New England reservedness. In three years there, we had only been invited to three or four homes for dinner–which felt odd and awkward.

The night before we left for Austin I was cleaning some things out of my church study when a parishioner drove by and saw the light on. She dropped in to say her last goodbyes, and we chatted for a while. She asked if I had any regrets. I noted how sad I was that so few families had invited us into their homes. She got a quizzical look on her face and said: "Oh--didn't anyone ever tell you?"

"Tell me what?" I replied.

"Tell you why you didn't get invited to people's homes," she said.

"Fill me in!" I said.

"Well," she began, "we used to invite our pastors to our homes but over the course of the last pastor's eighteen year ministry with us, when invited to dinner he would always reply: 'I'm sorry, but I don't mix business with pleasure.' Over time we just gave up and didn't ask anymore. We thought maybe all pastors felt this way so, wanting to respect their time and privacy, we just didn't ask anymore."   I was stunned.

Here's a good example of what Friedman calls "the body following the head."[3] Over time, parishioners will incorporate and assimilate much of a pastor's personality into their congregational system. A congregational system senses and internalizes a pastor's idiosyncracies and leadership style. This story shows how my wife and I misread why this behavior was present because we did not take a thorough history. Had we been more inquisitive, we could have addressed this "secret"[4] which caused hospitality to atrophy.

B. Assessing A System's Capacity for Change:

In one way or another, most D.Min. projects attempt to change an ecclesial system. Whether students' projects introduce a new program of evangelism or mission, a new stewardship campaign, a new take on preaching, an innovative pastoral care program, or new forms of worship or spiritual formation–most D.Min projects attempt to correct or enhance the effectiveness of a congregation's ministry.

Doctoral projects that do not thoughtfully assess Doctor of Ministry students' ecclesial contexts and their respective positions in these contexts prior to crafting and implementing projects designed to influence and change these contexts are misguided at least and potentially harmful at worst. Rabbi Edwin Friedman, author of Generation to Generation, was known to counsel clergy: "Make no substantive change in the first

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[3] Edwin Friedman, Generation to Generation, (New York: Guilford Press, 1985), 3.

[4] Ibid., 52-54. Friedman has an excellent section on how "secrets" covertly function to bind anxiety in a system.

year of a new call." After reading Doctor of Ministry project proposals in my first few months at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, I was struck by how little systemic assessment our students were doing on either their ecclesial contexts or themselves–chiefly because we were not requiring it. I became more and more convinced that we needed to require in-depth self and systemic congregational assessment in all our project proposals and evaluations. The following case study surfaced out of my first doctoral seminar where final project proposals were presented for approval.

The following case study illustrates the importance of students and faculty readers discerning and anticipating the potential negative impact a project might have on a student's congregation, and how resistant students can be to Friedman's advice that pastors should "make no substantive change in the first year of a new call." Friedman's belief that a pastor's first year in a new call should focus nearly exclusively on building relationships with parishioners in order to earn the "systemic currency" to make subsequent changes, challenges the conventional wisdom that asserts that pastors have a window of opportunity to implement change during their initial "honeymoon period." This time-sensitive opportunity for change in the "honeymoon" may well be true, but it still demands thoughtful contextual and relational discernment. Since the student's project was not approved, we'll never know what would have happened had he implemented it. Since the student only arrived at his church two weeks prior to my class, his faculty readers, fellow students, and I felt he had not served this congregation long enough to discern appropriately whether the system could sustain the degree of

change he wanted to introduce in the time-frame he intended.[5]

Case Study: **Assessing and Anticipating A System's Capacity for Change**:

Kurt, a Presbyterian student in my June Doctoral Methodology Seminar, presented his final project proposal for the first time. He offered a fascinating idea for a project. He had just been called to a new congregation.

Kurt wanted to revamp the way his congregation "called" officers to serve on church boards. He noted with much disdain that the Presbyterian way of calling officers was to elect a nominating committee who pondered the committee openings for the coming years and then "tried to find breathing bodies to fill the vacancies." The rub for him was that this method of selecting officers was more concerned with "filling the vacancies" than on "tapping the spiritual gifts of the congregation."

His project wanted to correct this existing system by first doing a substantive spiritual gifts inventory of the entire congregation and then create new congregational leadership positions and ministry opportunities based on the gifts, interests, and talents of his members. What a truly innovative idea–discerning members' spiritual gifts and talents for ministry and then asking them how, where, and in what capacity they would like to employ them!

There was one major problem, however. Although he had only been at this church several weeks, Kurt insisted that he wanted to initiate this new structure immediately. When confronted with the possibility that introducing such drastic

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[5] All case studies in this paper use fictitious names and identities.

structural change so quickly may cause more harm than good, Kurt became defensive and difficult to supervise. In spite of trying to persuade him that connecting with his parishioners and "joining"[6] the congregational system for at least a year before undertaking such drastic and sudden change was the higher road, our wisdom fell on deaf ears. Kurt lacked the pastoral patience to wait, got discouraged, and withdrew from the program and we never heard if he ever instituted his idea.

C. The Critical Role of Anxiety:

Few students ponder adequately how they or their projects are influenced by and subsequently affect and regulate the anxiety in their ecclesial system and how anxiety has both positive and negative systemic consequences. Conducting congregational research in a context where students have not adequately assessed both themselves and their contexts systemically not only inhibits the degree to which their projects' objectives will be realized, but can negatively influence the system by raising disruptive anxiety.

Had we signed off on Kurt's proposal, and allowed him to conduct it in the time-frame he desired, I believe we would have colluded in the negative systemic resistance

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[6] Michael Nichols,. Family Therapy: Concepts and Methods, New York: Gardner Press, 1984, 586. "Joining" is a "structural family therapy term for accepting and accommodating to families in order to win their confidence and circumvent resistance." It describes the initial process of a therapist learning to discern and "go with the flow" of a family's unique rhythms and idiosyncrasies before confronting dysfunction or suggesting structural change. The term has been expanded here to include the process by which leaders, including pastors, "join" their respective systems or institutions in ways which facilitate deeper connectedness.

that Kurt most likely would have encountered. Our faculty and the students in the methodology class liked Kurt's proposed project–in fact it was warmly embraced for its creativity and innovation. The issue was about timing and judgment. In systems language, Kurt had not yet earned the "systemic currency" to pull off such profound systemic change, nor had he been there long enough to discern how much change the congregation could reasonably embrace. His new congregation needed time to trust him and connect with him before such change was possible.

When requiring Austin Seminary students to assess their ecclesial context substantively, there are several family systems constructs or "lenses" we employ. The first is anxiety. Peter Steinke's trilogy of books on employing family systems theory to congregations (<u>How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems</u>, <u>Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach</u>, and <u>Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What</u>) are all required in my methods class.

D. Assessing Systemic Anxiety:

Family systems theorists note that all systems are anxious–the difference lying in matter of degree and kind. Anxiety, or what Murray Bowen also called "emotional reactivity,"[7] can be either *chronic* (fear of what might be) or *acute* (fear of what is). Bowen and Kerr define anxiety as ". . . the response of an organism to a threat, real or

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[7] Michael Kerr and Murray Bowen, <u>Family Evaluation</u>, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 320 (footnote).

imagined."[8] "It is assumed to be a process that, in some form, is present in all living things. Reactivity is manifested along a continuum that ranges from hyperactivity (the extreme is behavioral frenzy) to hypoactivity (the extreme is behavioral paralysis)."[9] Bowen noted anxiety's "fluid' capacity to "transfer" from one family member to another.[10] Steinke calls anxiety "contagious and infectious."[11]

In Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times, Steinke offers "Thirteen Triggers of Anxiety for Congregations." The thirteen anxiety triggers (not in any order of rank) are: 1) Money, 2) Sex and Sexuality, 3) Pastor's Leadership Style, 4) Lay Leadership Style, 5) Growth and Survival, 6) Boundaries, 7) Trauma and Transition, 8) Staff Conflict, 9) Harm Done to or Death of a Child, 10) Old vs. New, 11) Contemporary and Traditional Worship, 12) Gap between the Ideal and the Real, 13) Building, Construction, Space, and Territory.[12] In my opinion, Steinke needs a 14th trigger–*Gender*–in part because congregational studies gives gender its own category. But more importantly, Steinke needs a "gender trigger" because of how women and men are treated differently in churches for various cultural and theological reasons. This inequity is the source of much anxiety in ecclesial systems--especially where that inequality is either minimized and/or sustained by pastors and church leaders. Steinke includes "Gender" under Old vs. New.

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[8] Ibid, 112.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Murray Bowen, Family Therapy in Clinical Practice, (New York: Jason Aronson, 1978), 6-8.

[11] Peter Steinke, Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times, (Herndon, VA: 2006), 10-11.

[12] ibid

We have found Steinke's "thirteen triggers" to be so helpful a gauge of congregational anxiety that each student is required to address each one when assessing their congregation's system before beginning any research. Why do we require this?

First, we want our faculty advisors to know what anxiety is present in our students' contexts before allowing them to begin a ministry project–rather like an electrician discerning if an outlet is "hot" before allowing an apprentice to fix it.

Second, we want our students to know where and to what extent anxiety is embedded in their congregation's past and present narrative.

Third, we assume that all systems contain anxiety and we want our students to know how to assess its severity.

Fourth, we want students to assess to what extent the system's anxiety is "chronic" or "acute." Chronic anxiety tends to be more pervasive, irrational, and "free-floating" (i.e., afraid of what might be)–whereas acute anxiety is more directly related to specific situations (i.e., afraid of what is).

Finally, what we really want to know is whether students have adequately anticipated how their projects will both be affected by and subsequently affect the congregation's anxiety before beginning the research, and whether they have developed thoughtful contingencies to address whatever anxiety surfaces. Will the project lower or heighten the congregation's anxiety? Will introducing the ministry project in the congregation have any predictable effects on its system? How might students respond to predictable heightened anxiety?

Not all anxiety in a system is negative. Anxiety provides opportunities for

change. In fact, it is hard to imagine any substantive change occurring without some

anxiety fueling and sustaining it. As Peter Steinke often says to conflicted

congregations: "Don't let your suffering go to waste."[13] Friedman writes: "Ultimately

healing and survival depend on . . . vision, on hope, on the imaginative capacity, on the

ability to transcend the anxiety of those about us, and on a response to challenge that

treats crisis as opportunity for growth . . . ."[14]

Case Study: Assessing Systemic Anxiety:

Kim, a male Korean Baptist pastor in our program is currently finishing a

fascinating project. A number of bright and gifted Korean women enrolled in Ph.D.

programs in various fields (and who plan to return to Korea to teach once their studies

are completed) joined Kim's church that is located in a city with a large university.

Kim noted that his mother received a Master's degree in Korea but was "held

back" because of Korea's predominant views on women in a largely Confucianism

culture. He confessed that he is "working out" some personal injustice he feels about

how his mother endured discrimination and sexism in Korea. His project's objective

was to introduce seven women doctoral students to feminist thinkers and theologians

with the hope that they will return to Korea as rising women leaders and teachers with

new perspectives and with the hope of making whatever contribution they can to

changing a patriarchal society.

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[13] Ibid., 14

[14] Generation to Generation, 5.

He hopes to achieve this through 1) offering a didactic group where he and these seven women study feminist authors, 2) offering a "round table preaching group"[15] where he and these women interpret, through feminist perspectives, three Scripture texts he chose (Gen. Ch. 2, Gen. Ch. 3, and I Cor. Ch. 14) and then preached over the course of several Sundays. Members of the round table preaching group helped Kim craft each Sunday's sermon based on feminist perspectives on the text, and 3) Kim modeling Christian inclusiveness through both his interpretation and public proclamation of the Gospel.

As you might imagine, much anxiety surfaced in the class and me when he first presented this project. Several students half-jokingly asked if he had a current resume ready to send out after introducing this project. But as he pressed on, the tenor of the discussion changed. Some in the class noted that his project was "prophetic," others said it was "brave," others used the terms "noble," and "courageous." It was clear that Kim felt called by God to "take a stand" for what he believed in biblically, theologically, spiritually, and personally about women and their role in the Church. Kim embodied tremendous passion for this project.

Although his Korean faculty advisor, the class, and I all voiced substantive reservations about how much anxiety this project would elicit, we were all convinced and convicted by Kim's earnestness and courage. He demonstrated the core constructs

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[15] John S. McClure, The Round Table Pulpit, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995). A "round table pulpit" group is a gathering of lay persons and the pastor who together study texts prior to them being preached by the pastor in order collaboratively to interpret upcoming texts (usually lectionary texts) and help the pastor craft his/her sermons.

of self-differentiation, namely, taking a stand, staying connected to the system, committing himself to non-reactivity, and basing his leadership decisions on principles. Several in the class were moved to tears by the depth of his character and integrity. Kim convinced us that a certain degree of anxiety was, in fact, necessary for him to initiate these kind of new conversations and changes in his Korean congregation. Friedman writes: "Family therapy, instead of trying to calm the family, tends to treat crisis as an opportunity for bringing change to the entire emotional system, with the result that everyone, and not just the identified patient, personally benefits and grows."[16]

We ultimately approved his project with a deep and abiding sense that this was a prophetic and ground-breaking work and that Kim's project would be a gift, not only to these seven women and to Kim's church, but also to other congregations which face similar issues. We approved this project because Kim did substantive contextual assessment and convinced us that his congregation represented a unique gathering of highly educated and progressive Korean people who not only hungered for such change–but who had the maturity to embrace it.

In a recent phone conversation with Kim, he reported that his project elicited no substantive turbulence and, in fact, had an "overwhelmingly positive" influence on his congregation. He reported that several men, after hearing his three sermons, said that they had "had a change of opinion" about how they view women. Only one of the seven women in the group reported in her final evaluation that "she did not gain very

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[16] Generation to Generation, 23.

much" from participating in the study. The other six women reported such phrases as: "the study was very exciting," "liberating," "deeply appreciated," "I loved it!"

E. Defining Resistance and Homeostasis:

Friedman defines "homeostasis" as: "The tendency of any set of relationships to strive perpetually, in self-corrective ways, to preserve the organizing principles of its own existence."[17] In physics we remember the principle of inertia–the tendency of a body at rest to remain at rest. Physics also teaches that for every action there will be a reaction–and homeostatic reactions function to "keep things as they are" and resist change. "Resistance" is a system's way of either avoiding or sabotaging change–taking on both overt (outward defiance or aggression) and covert forms (passive-aggressive sabotage).

Homeostasis is also described as "balance" and "equilibrium."[18] Understanding this powerful systemic force is not as easy as one may first think. All systems have predictable homeostatic rhythms–but not all rhythms are healthy. Certain systems actually function in a constant state of dysfunction that "works" in its own unique way for that particular system. Things that appear horribly out of balance to an outsider looking in–feel perfectly "normal" to insiders. I once served a congregation which had over a million dollar endowment yet had kitchen cabinets that were so old that peeling lead paint chips routinely fell on their dishes.

Describing the power of homeostatic forces and how they tenaciously resist

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[17] Ibid. 23
[18] Generation to Generation, 18.

change, Friedman wrote: ". . . churches and synagogues will often tolerate and adapt to trouble-making complainers and downright incompetents, whereas the creative thinker who disturbs the balance of things will be ignored, if not let go."[19] This is because, in the absence of a well-differentiated leader who can counter homeostatic forces, systems will develop "a regressive, counter-evolutionary trend in which the most dependent members of any organization set the agendas, where adaptation is constantly toward weakness rather than strength, thus leveraging power to the recalcitrant, the passive-aggressive, and the most anxious members of an institution rather than toward the energetic, the visionary, the imaginative, and the most creatively motivated."[20]

Alcoholic families, for example, have a certain chronic addictive imbalance that paradoxically acts to maintain systemic dysfunction. Often spouses of alcoholics need the alcoholic to be "sick and dependent" in order to feel needed, important, and good about themselves. If you want to see homeostasis get turned upside down–watch what happens in an alcoholic system when the alcoholic gets sober! When pursuing my degree in addiction counseling, many instructors noted a common phenomenon in alcoholic marriages. Apparently, when an alcoholic stops drinking, the faithful spouse who has endured years of abusive alcoholic behavior and who is viewed by others as "a saint," often divorces the alcoholic within a year of the alcoholic spouse achieving sobriety and often becomes quickly entangled with another alcoholic.[21]

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[19] Ibid., 25
[20] <u>Failure of Nerve</u>, 10.
[21] Richard Dunn, Class Notes.

F. Assessing Resistance and Homeostasis:

Family systems theory assumes that any system resists change–even when the change is for the better–sometimes especially when change is for the better. A well-defined leader creates healthy dissonance. Maybe this is what Jesus was referring to in Luke 6:26 when he warns: "Woe to you when all speak well of you"–the type of person Friedman called "a peace monger."[22] Friedman defines a "peace monger" as someone who is a:

> . . . highly anxious risk-avoider, someone more concerned
> with good feelings than with progress, someone whose life
> revolves around the axis of consensus, a 'middler,' someone
> who is incapable of taking well-defined stands that the
> 'disability' seems to be genetic, someone who functions as if
> they had been filleted of their backbone, someone who treats
> conflict or anxiety like mustard gas–one whiff and on goes
> the emotional gas mask and they flit. Such leaders are often
> 'nice,' if not charming.[23]

Friedman noted that there is a very easy way to assess a system's capacity to embrace differentiated leadership. He writes:

> . . . there is a very accurate test that any religious leader can
> use to obtain a reading on where members of his
> congregation tend to cluster along the scale of
> differentiation. All we have to do is give a talk in which we
> carefully differentiate ourselves–define clearly what we
> believe and where we stand on issues, in a way that is totally
> devoid of 'shoulds' and 'musts.'[24]

Assessing homeostasis and systemic equilibrium is so important to Doctor of

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[22] Edwin H. Friedman, <u>A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix</u>, (Bethesda, MD: The Edwin Friedman Trust, 1999) 12.
[23] Ibid., 254.
[24] <u>Generation to Generation</u>, 30.

Ministry projects precisely because most D.Min. projects, by their definition, intend to effect some change on a congregational system. This being the case, D.Min. students must assess what type of homeostatic forces and resistance may surface during their projects in order to anticipate a mature pastoral response to it. Thoughtful pre-project assessment should help students develop contingencies to address what will predictably surface.

G) Addressing Resistance and Homeostasis Playfully and Paradoxically:

Friedman writes: "The capacity of clergy to be paradoxical, challenging (rather than saving), earthy, sometimes crazy, and even 'devilish,' often can do more to loosen knots of anxiety in a congregational relationship than the most well-meaning 'serious' efforts."[25] What Friedman is getting at, is to develop a leadership style that can respond paradoxically and playfully to predictable homeostasis and resistance that often surfaces as deadly seriousness because "the act of being playful frees others by forcing them out of their 'serious' games."[26]

For example, because Friedman rightly understood that "criticism is a form of pursuit," he often counseled clergy who had just endured a ranting diatribe from an angry parishioner to respond: "I can see you've really been missing me." Responding in such a paradoxical and "devilish" way helps leaders not get caught in the "content" trap set before them by naming instead what is really going on under the surface–namely that the upset parishioner feels distant or disconnected from the pastor.

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[25] Ibid, 209.
[26] Ibid

Taking such paradoxical stances allows leaders to focus on "process" instead of getting entangled in the "tar baby" of "content." Systems theorists distinguish between "content and process"[27] by noting that *content* is the data being discussed (the he said/she said) whereas *process* refers to what is going on underneath the surface of the conversation. When my young children argue over who got more ice cream I don't respond to the "content" by weighing each bowl--but rather respond on a "process level" by saying: "Daddy loves you both the same," which more accurately addresses their real concern.

What if a pastor who is introducing a new stewardship program in her church as her final D.Min. project could become "playful, devilish, and irreverent"[28] about the embedded anxiety in the church's history surrounding money and stewardship prior to introducing the project? What if she could anticipate predictable objections and resistance before they surface? What if she could head off those who are functioning like a virus in the system before they "sabotage"[29] the project? What if she could find a way to "re-frame" the project by appropriately employing humor and paradox to introduce and implement it? For example, the pastor might prepare a stewardship sermon with the following "playful and irreverent" title: "Our Church's Eleventh

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[27] Ibid, 207.

[28] For a larger of discussion see: "The Paradox of Seriousness and The Playfulness of Paradox" in <u>Generation to Generation</u>, 50-52, and also 39.

[29] "Sabotage" from a systems perspective refers to both the overt and covert attempts to block change (and often growth or health) through acts of resistance which are often acted out and implemented without taking direct responsibility for them (i.e., passive aggressiveness). Often ridiculous excuses are crafted in order to block change and draw attention away from the real or underlying hidden reasons for the systemic resistance, <u>Generation to Generation</u>, 224.

Commandment: Thou Shall Not Spend Our Endowment!" in order to "name the proverbial elephant in the room."

Stewardship campaigns, from a systems perspective, are tricky because stewardship campaigns are "a form of pursuit" (trying to get people to give or give more) and a common human reaction to pursuit is to distance or "cut off." I have often wondered what would happen if the objective of a new stewardship campaign were to "do nothing at all" except announce from the pulpit: "There will be no stewardship drive this year. Just do the best you can." This approach connects with a systems notion that all systems, to varying degrees are "self-correcting."[30] By "self-correcting," family systems theorists are referring to the innate capacity in all organic systems to desire and move towards health, maturity, and differentiation when not substantively impeded. Friedman writes: "Generally, the human components of a family system have the capacity for some self-differentiation, the capacity for some awareness of their own position in the relationship system, how it is affected by balancing forces, and how changes in each individual's functioning can in turn influence that homeostasis."[31] My hunch is that the most effective D.Min. projects are the ones which do not try to "fix" a congregation but rather are designed and implemented so as to help a congregation "self-correct." A famous American aviation story offers a helpful analogy when pondering how to "push through" homeostatic forces effectively.

A Lesson From Physics: Addressing Resistance Paradoxically:

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[30] Ibid., 27.
[31] Ibid.

On October 14, 1947, a 24-year-old test pilot named Capt. Chuck Yeager flying the experimental aircraft--the XS1 (with a couple broken ribs and no ejector seat), was the first to break "the sound barrier." All pilots who previously attempted it failed because right before reaching the speed of sound the turbulence created such erratic air flow and violent "shock waves" that they felt they would crash so they let off the throttle. Air encompasses a jet the way water cascades around the bow of a ship–the higher the speed the more the resistance. Air eventually creates a "bubble" of resistance around the nose of the plane–a type of membrane or "barrier" which subsequently increases turbulence.

In the late 1940's it was believed the sound barrier could never be broken. When interviewed after his record setting feat, Yeager reported that immediately after hearing the "sonic boom" caused by bursting through the "barrier"–everything calmed down and there was peace. Paradoxically, Yeager did the opposite of conventional aviation wisdom by giving the XS1 the throttle instead of decelerating. He possessed the rare courage to "push through the challenge" of the sound barrier rather than backing off. So often pastoral leadership fails to reach its highest apex because pastors anxiously acquiesce to homeostatic resistance and "eject"–unwilling to push through congregational sound barriers. We all know that without challenge no organism, system, or person ever reaches its highest potential. Friedman often refers to the high degree of systemic health a leader can facilitate by being and maintaining a "challenging presence."[32]

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[32] Friedman, Failure of Nerve, 13, 143, 147, 254, 286. Organisms, systems, and persons all require challenge in order to develop and reach their highest potential functioning (maturity.)

Pastor Kim chose to "push through" some longstanding and potentially prickly cultural and theological "barriers" because he believed that "taking a stand" for the Gospel and his Korean women members was worth the price of negotiating whatever turbulence might arise. We need to clarify what systems theorists mean by "pushing through" resistance–what it is and what it is not--so as not to endorse tyrannical leadership. Kim demonstrated the kind of well-differentiated pastoral leadership Friedman describes below.

H. What the Ideal Well-Differentiated Leader Looks Like.

Friedman writes:

> I want to stress that by well-differentiated leader I do not mean someone who autocratically tells others what to do or coercively orders them around, although any leader who defines him or herself clearly may be perceived that way by those who are not taking responsibility for their own emotional being and destiny. Rather I mean someone who has clarity about his or her own life goals, and, therefore someone who is less likely to become lost in anxious emotional processes swirling about. I mean someone who can separate while still remaining connected, and therefore can maintain a modifying, non-anxious and sometimes challenging presence. I mean someone who can manage his or her own reactivity to the automatic reactivity of others, and therefore be able to take stands at the risk of displeasing. It is not as though some leaders can do this and some cannot. No one does this easily, and most leaders, I have learned, can improve their capacity.[33]

Having defined "homeostasis" and addressed ways to assess it, and having noted what well-differentiated leadership ideally looks like, let us now turn to one of homeostasis' more common, intractable, and seductive manifestations: Over-

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[33] Ibid, 13.

function/Under-functioning.

I. Over-functioning and Under-functioning is one of many examples of how homeostasis gets manifested. Bowen family systems theory is based on cellular biology, and Friedman was known to say: "In order for there to be disease process there has to be a host cell."[34] For cancer to grow and spread (over-function) it has to have an environment that feeds and sustains it–sometimes denoting a weakened or compromised immune system (under-functioning). For a person to become diabetic (having too much sugar) the pancreas must under-function (not produce enough insulin). When certain church members wield too much power--other members are not claiming and exerting enough. If a pastor is doing too much of a church's ministry it may be because she wants to control everything and makes sure it is "done right" or is fearful it won't get done at all (over-functioning). Mickie Crimone of The Center For Family Process writes: "No two objects can occupy the same space at the same time. The more you do the less they do."[35] When pastors over-function to ensure "ministry gets done and is done right" it robs parishioners of the challenge of living into their vocation by hijacking their Christian responsibilities.

<u>Case Study</u>: **The Power of Over-functioning and Under-functioning**:

      I previously served a 150 member Presbyterian Church that had a 1.3 million

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[34] For Friedman's understanding of "disease" see <u>Generation to Generation</u>., 121-130.

[35] Mickie Crimone, "Misplace Ministry," The Center for Family Process web page

dollar endowment that it received as a memorial gift from a nonmember. Not long after receiving it, the gift turned out to be more demon than angel because giving and stewardship swiftly declined and anxiety in the church simultaneously increased significantly around "saving the endowment." Sadly, it became a "golden calf" because it created the perfect double bind–people didn't give because the church "had so much money in the bank" and the church officers voraciously protected the endowment "because people don't give!"

A Doctor of Ministry project that attempted to address annual giving and stewardship in this church would have to take careful assessment of how this gift affected this church's larger system and design a thoughtful project taking this embedded systemic anxiety into account. But further, it would have to reflect theologically on a biblical understanding of stewardship and gifts. And further yet, it must assess a common element of homeostasis--**over-functioning/under-functioning**.

Simply said, if some part of a system is under-functioning then another part of the system must be over-functioning–and visa versa.[36] This huge endowment caused the congregation to under-function by way of decreased giving and over-function by way of unduly increasing anxiety over protecting the endowment–how its funds were spent, invested, disseminated, and controlled. In Matthew 6:21, Jesus speaks to such anxiety when he said: "Wherever your treasure is–there your heart (anxiety) will be also." Curiously, although richly endowed, this congregation thought of itself and "functioned" as though it were poor. Responding to this imbalance, I once "devilishly"

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[36] For a larger discussion of "over-functioning" see Generation to Generation, 210-212.

asked at a session meeting, "Do you want to be a church or a museum?"

And here's the point–this church had other options. How it viewed and managed its endowment is a window into the church's larger "emotional process"[37] and along with other elements in that process, the endowment only holds this much power and functions as it does because of the presence of other emotional elements and processes. Peter Steinke calls this "the mutual influence of behaviors."[38] Although the church leaders acknowledged that they had bought into an unhealthy and debilitating dependence on the endowment, they could not muster the courage or vision to designate the endowment's earnings solely to fund mission, for example, thereby placing a more biblically appropriate emphasis on the congregation's "treasure."

The homeostatic dance of *over-functioning and under-functioning* constitutes a symbiotic relationship–each process benefitting from the other–albeit in curiously unbalanced ways. Anxious persons will too soon rush in to do the tasks of ministry "because if I don't do it nobody will." Over-functioners won't allow enough anxiety to "backwash"[39] through the system to see who might appropriately step in and do the work. If lay persons are not rising to the occasion of mature discipleship–it may be because the pastor won't share and delegate ministry tasks. Doctor of Ministry students

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[37] Ibid., 123, and Murray Bowen, <u>Family Therapy in Clinical Practice</u>, 304-305.

[38] Peter Steinke, class notes.

[39] "Backwash" is a systems term referring to re-directing or "giving anxiety back" to its original and proper source and not getting entangled in it. It is what must happen if anxiety is to be handled well in a system. "Detriangling" is an example of "backwashing anxiety"–meaning getting both parties who are not speaking to communicate directly instead of through a third person in the triangle. "Detriangling" is accomplished by refusing to be a "message bearer;" by engaging in "direct communication;" by avoiding "collusion;" and by refusing to "keep secrets." See Bowen, <u>Family Therapy in Clinical Practice</u>, 11, and 250-254.

are well advised to consider the under-functioning/over-functioning phenomenon in their respective systems since their projects often try to correct some aspect of either one of these processes. I often see Doctor of Ministry projects that actually contribute to pastoral over-functioning or what Friedman aptly called behavior driven by "helper genes." I'd love to see a D.Min. project where the student's objective was to function less in order to challenge lay leaders to function more--and for the pastor to embody enough of a "non-anxious presence"[40] to pull it off!

Part II–Critical Examination of Oneself and One's Position in a System

As noted in the introduction, it is important that Doctor of Ministry students learn to assess both themselves and their "position" in their respective ecclesial systems. This self-assessment happens before, during, and after the completion of the final project. Students must learn to: 1) assess themselves systemically in the proposal stage, 2) self-correct and adapt to the system during the project, and 3) evaluate themselves after the project is finished. Part II of this paper has four sub-sections: A) Critically Assessing Onself; B) Position vs. Personality; C) The Critical Role of Triangles; and D) Leadership Through Differentiation.

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[40] Murray Bowen, Family Therapy in Clinical Practice, (New York: Jason Aronson, 1982). "Non-anxious presence" was first coined by Bowen and was subsequently embraced by most family systems theorists and therapists. I prefer the term "non-reactive presence" because I think it is more reasonable to achieve "non-reactivity" than a "non-anxious presence" I realize that Bowen and Friedman are accenting the word "presence," but in difficult situations, I'm not sure anyone is ever "non-anxious." I believe mature persons can so monitor themselves so as to be "non-reactive" even when anxious. Reframing the goal to be "non-reactive" instead of "non-anxious" has been helpful to me because it has given me permission to be anxious yet non-reactive. See also--Friedman, Generation to Generation, 27, 208-210.

A. Critically Assessing Oneself:

English poet Alexander Pope is attributed with coining the phrase: *"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread."* It is unwise not to attempt to understand substantively one's position in a system, how one functions in that position, and how the whole ecclesial context functions systemically around "the mutual influence of behaviors" prior to designing and implementing a project, especially one that intends to change a system because not to do so assumes that students may underestimate their own power to effect systemic change and may unintentionally open up a "Pandora's box."

Self-assessment, from a systems perspective, always involves helping students to examine not just their personalities but their *positions in the system* and how that position either mimics or stands against their position in their family of origin (both one's birth order and one's role in the family).[41] One of Friedman's more probing and insightful questions is: "Which of your ancestors really ordained you?"[42] What he was getting at is that families often "choose" who the clergy in the family will be and it is important for one to know the process by which one got "selected" for that position.

Beeson Divinity School currently requires all its D.Min. students to complete and discuss a "genogram" of their family of origin with a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) during their first two week doctoral seminar entitled: "Reflective Practice of Ministry." Program director Mark Searby reports that they require this of students so they "learn more fully who they are as pastors and what they bring to the program and

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[41] Ronald W. Richardson, <u>Creating A Healthier Church, Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life</u>, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996). For a good discussion on how birth order influences church leadership see chapter 11 in Richardson's book, 144-155.
[42] <u>Generation to Generation</u>, 22.

their ministries" by way of their family background and history. Students submit it during the first week of the seminar and it is presented and discussed early in the second week of classes.

Friedman noted that when addressing systemic homeostasis and resistance, family systems theory emphasizes one's *position* in the system more than one's *personality*.[43] As D.Min. Directors most of us know far too well the challenges of our unique "position" on a seminary faculty. Most of us are hired as "Administrative Faculty," (a kind of neither fish nor fowl position) which means we are generally not tenured, do not get extended sabbaticals, and are hired on 3-5 year renewable terms. Our "position" in the system, by definition, places us in awkward triangles between teaching faculty, administrators, and our students. We hold classic middle-management positions that must manage much responsibility with limited institutional power. We routinely must delicately negotiate the predictable structural "double binds" associated with our "position." Our options on how to handle faculty/student conflicts, recalcitrant faculty and students who don't return work on time, course projections, teaching rotations, and department politics, etc. is more governed by our "position" in the system than our personality. More will be said about this later, especially as it relates to the "position" one holds/held in one's family of origin and how that "position" currently affects how one functions in other systems.

Since most Doctor of Ministry projects, in one way or another, attempt to offer some kind of corrective change to an existing ecclesial system, and since even small

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[43] Ibid., 24.

changes to a system always affect the larger whole–students must anticipate how their respective positions in the systems and their projects will subsequently affect the larger system. Most doctoral projects seek to improve how ministry is practiced in a particular context, and this requires not only the doctoral student becoming acquainted with new resources, developing new theological conversation partners, and learning new pastoral skills–it equally involves students helping lay persons become more self-aware of how they understand, articulate, express, and live their faith and theology. Both pastors and congregants must learn new ways to "read" and interpret their respective narratives and contexts and family systems theory offers one of those ways.

Further, however, pastors must learn how to assess their own positions in the system in order to explore and examine how they are functioning in that system. Most Doctor of Ministry projects include some kind of educational or didactic component for lay-persons, but far too few require deep and abiding critical self-assessment of the pastor doing the research, including doing "family of origin work" and how the project may represent a projection of the pastor's inner-world and unresolved family and relational issues.

One cannot read The Association of Theological Schools' (ATS) guidelines for Doctor of Ministry programs and not know that the capacity to reflect critically on both oneself and one's ministry context are two of the highest ATS objectives for all D.Min. programs. Because critical self-reflection is so integral to how ATS understands the task of its approved D.Min. programs, Austin Seminary now requires pastors to assess not only their strongly held theological beliefs, assumptions, and presuppositions, but also

what they may be "working out" personally in their projects with the hope of seeing and naming unresolved family of origin issues. Family systems theory is particularly instructive on self-examination because self-assessment is so imbedded in both its theory and practice.

One of the things that I so often see in pastors who do not fully understand systems theory is that they inappropriately use it to "diagnose" a system–noting such things as "triangulation," "viruses," "collusion," "scapegoating," etc., with a detached, pseudo-objective/clinical or haughty "know it all" stance. The adage: "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing," is well heeded here. Properly understood and applied--systems theory is not diagnostic! Bowen and Friedman both noted that as soon as you focus on someone or something other than yourself in the system--you are not thinking systemically which leads to erroneous conclusions. Friedman writes: "The possibilities for change are maximized rather when we concentrate on modifying our own way of functioning, our own input, into the family . . . ."[44] Family systems theory, properly understood and practiced, seeks to be more "observational and descriptive" than "diagnostic" because family systems theorists note that the only thing in a system one can ultimately change is oneself–or better stated–one can only change how one functions in the system.

Case Study: **The Importance of Critically Assessing Oneself**: Ronald, a Lutheran pastor, had finished all his course work, but had yet to get his final project approved. I had just arrived and was trying to help him get his proposal approved.

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[44] Ibid., 18.

His proposal involved creating intergenerational Christian Education venues around nodal Christian liturgical holidays such as Christmas Eve, Good Friday, Ash Wednesday, and All Saints Day–to name a few. He wanted to correct how most churches compartmentalize Christian education classes by age. He felt much would be gained by placing children in the same liturgical and educational events with adults of all ages.

My first read of the proposal left me flat and bewildered. The idea made some sense to me, but reading it with a "hermeneutic of suspicion"[45]–I sensed there was far more of his story in his project than he was letting on. His paper presented an argument that was essentially passionless, and I've since learned that passionless projects seldom succeed.

I called Ronald and inquired why placing children and adults in the same church venues on liturgical holy days was so important to him. I asked what was at stake for him in this project. He answered by telling the following story.

About twenty-five years earlier, he was leading a Good Friday evening worship service while his three-year-old daughter was fighting for her life in a local emergency room. He finished the service, rushed to the hospital, only to have his beloved daughter die in his arms. The extended family felt that the seven-year-old sister should be "sheltered and protected" from the trauma of the viewing, the funeral, and committal

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[45] Paul Ricoeur, <u>Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation</u>, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970, 33. Ricoeur's use of this phrase refers to his method of interpretation which assumes that the literal or surface-level meaning of a text may conceal or cloud covert or hidden meanings. I expand its meaning here to include the "suspicious" assessment of systems and narratives. The purpose of being "suspicious" is meant appropriately to "strip away" or "unmask" narratives' multiple underlying stories with the hope of discovering hidden meanings or deeper truth.

services. He and his extended family systemically insulated the older daughter from the family grief rituals, and blocked her from attending the funeral, "so as not to traumatize her."

Ronald reported that twenty-five years later, the older sister is still angry and hurt that she was blocked from these important events surrounding her sister's death and still holds a grudge towards all adults who had any part in obstructing her.

Suddenly it became clear why Ronald wanted to put children and adults together on Good Friday and All Saints Day. That Ronald was working out some unresolved family issues in his D.Min. project was unmistakable. Once Ronald openly named what family issues he was working out--his project immediately took on new life and freshness. Once Ronald was given permission, in fact, invited to be more candid about what was lying underneath his project's objective, we were far better equipped to help him address "the real itch he was trying to scratch."

 In fact, Ronald actually shared his painful story with the congregation prior to implementing his project, with the hope that this information would help his flock understand his project's objectives. Ronald's project took on new depth and direction, and ultimately addressed the project's underlying issues which were far more interesting and profound than what he first presented. A project that was initially "flat" became immediately three-dimensional as it examined and assessed how churches tend to compartmentalize their members based on age--and subsequently how adults and children both miss important relationships when they are so segregated.

At Austin Seminary we assume that there is some degree of projection in every

Doctor of Ministry project proposal. It is not always as dramatic or personal as Ronald's, and it is not always a student working out some unresolved family issue, but it is there nonetheless. We require each student to wrestle with such questions as: "What am I working out in myself, my family of origin, or my spiritual or professional journey in this project?" We are now persuaded that if we do not ask our students to answer such family systems questions, important pieces to the project will be missed. As a way to help our students do this, Ronald W. Richardson's book, <u>Becoming a Healthier Pastor</u>, is required reading in our methodology seminar. Particularly helpful is Part Two of Richardson's book: "The Pastor's Own Family."[46]

Another helpful self-assessment tool for D.Min. students is a "Family of Origin Scale" developed by Hovestadt, Anderson, Piercy, Cochran, and Fine in 1985 which employs forty questions which attempt to measure one's perception of health in one's family of origin.[47]

B. Position vs. Personality: I suggested earlier that Friedman noted that often one's position in a system is more powerful and important than one's personality. Assessing one's systemic position is tricky because how one functions in that position is often related to birth order and how one functioned (or still functions) in one's family of

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[46] Ronald W. Richardson, <u>Becoming a Healthier Pastor</u>, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 37-106.

[47] Hovestadt, Anderson, Piercy, and Cochran, *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 1985, Vol. 11, No. 3, 287-297. Although somewhat dated, the article is based on five timeless constructs of healthy family functioning gleaned from several influential family systems theorists. The five constructs are: 1) range of feelings expressed in the family, 2) family's mood and tone, and a family's capacity for: 3) conflict resolution, 4) empathy, and 5) trust.

origin.[48] What role did/does the pastor play in his/her family–"hero," "mediator," "peace-maker," "rebel," "lost child," "mascot," "clown," "symptom bearer," "savior," "standard bearer," "carrier of the family name," etc.? Just as Bowen surmised that we tend to marry people of about the same level of differentiation as ourselves, family systems therapist and pastor Doug Hester asks: "Do pastors get called to churches of the same level of differentiation as themselves?"[49] Do immature churches call immature pastors? Do narcissistic pastors seek narcissistic churches–and visa versa? Do churches with high levels of differentiation call well-differentiated leaders?

In cases where pastors have been discovered to have boundary or moral problems that supposedly go "undiscovered for years"– we have good indicators that those churches who "didn't see" or "didn't name" the behaviors most often have a poor "anti-body system." By this I refer to the systems concept that "disease doesn't occur in a vacuum"–meaning that in order for a pastor to repeatedly violate boundaries for long periods of time, the system, on some level, allows this to occur by "choosing not to see."

After conducting over 150 church conflict interventions, Peter Steinke can cite dozens of stories of churches with longstanding histories and "toxic systemic patterns"– churches where several pastors in a row either got run off, got divorced, had affairs, or had heart attacks or suffered other illnesses. The health of a leader has to be equal to, or

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[48] Ronald W. Richardson, <u>Family Ties that Bind</u>, (Bellingham: Self-Counsel Press, 1995); and <u>Birth Order and You</u>, (Bellingham: Self-Counsel Press, 2000).

[49] Doug Hester, class notes. Doug Hester holds a D.Min. degree from Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. He is an ordained Lutheran pastor (ELCA) who is also a licensed marriage and family therapist who trained under Friedman for many years. He offers monthly systems theory consultation and didactic groups for clergy and therapists throughout Texas and Oklahoma. His web site is: www.ministryleadershipconcepts.com. The author has participated in his didactic group for five years.

greater than, the systemic forces the leader is called to identify and address.   In order to be effective, pastoral leaders must remain connected to the healthiest parts of the system and generally be supported with systemic health–namely–mature lay leaders. This is why "Lone Rangers" create such havoc in pastoral ministry–they function so independently that they do not *stay connected to the entire system*.

Friedman said that "position in the system is more important than personality" because a pastor with a "wonderful and caring personality" could be placed in a pathologically "fused and undifferentiated" system and "position" will out trump "personality" every time. We don't have time here to explore all the subtleties of how birth order inform position in a congregational system, but imagine what happens when a pastor who is an over-achieving first-born son has an elder on his board who is a not so successful second-born son who harbors intense resentments toward a very successful older brother. Or imagine a woman pastor in her 40's who has unresolved issues with an overbearing and very strict military officer father with whom she is "cut off"[50] emotionally and has a retired Marine Colonel on her board who reminds her of her dad.

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[50] Murray Bowen, <u>Family Therapy in Clinical Practice</u>, 382-384. Bowen first added the phrase "emotional cutoff" to his theory in 1975 in order to describe the process by which persons get emotional distance in their families and "separate themselves from their past in order to start their lives in the present." Family therapists look for "cutoff" in both current and previous generations. Bowen noted that: "The person who runs away from his family is just as emotionally dependent as the person who never leaves home. They both need emotional closeness, but they are allergic to it." In contrast to "cutoff" is differentiation which is assessed by the degree to which a person can be themselves yet "stay connected" to everyone in the system.

C. The Critical Role of Triangles:

One of the greatest of all self-assessment tools has to do with understanding and examining how one functions in the myriad of congregational triangles pastors must negotiate. Murray Bowen writes:

> The theory states that the triangle, a three person emotional configuration, is the molecule or basic building block of any emotional system, whether it is a family or another group. The triangle is the smallest stable relationship system. A two-person system may be stable as long as it is calm, but when anxiety increases, it immediately involves the most vulnerable other person to become a triangle. When tension in the triangle is too great for the threesome, it involves others to become a series of interlocking triangles."[51]

Developing tools which help pastors understand that triangles function to lower congregational anxiety and that observing how they function in specific contexts is very helpful to Doctor of Ministry students because such tools provide new perspectives into why congregations behave as they do. Developing the skills to observe and discern how triangles operate in one's ecclesial system can help pastors anticipate how and where anxiety surrounding the project's objective will surface and offers the pastor time and insights to develop thoughtful contingencies to address it if and when it does. Understanding triangles helps pastors not get caught up in their seductive power and enhances one's capacity to become more detached and observational while staying connected–a more differentiated researcher.

A major gift that any Doctor of Ministry program can make to the Church is to help develop and cultivate well-differentiated pastoral leaders. But what would such

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[51] Murray Bowen, <u>Family Therapy in Clinical Practice</u>, 373.

well-differentiated pastoral leaders ideally look like? What capacities for leadership would they possess? How would we know one if we encountered one? This leads us to this section's final piece–*Leadership Through Self-Differentiation*.

D. Leadership Through Self-Differentiation:

Bowen believed a person's level of differentiation could be measured through his "scale of differentiation." Bowen's scale assesses persons' degree of differentiation on a scale of 1-100--1 being lowest and 100 being highest.[52] "The scale refers to the level of solid self which is within the self, which is stable under stress, and which remains uninfluenced by the relationship system."[53] By this Bowen is referring to the self's capacity to take a stand that is true to itself even when confronted with significant systemic pressure to acquiesce. He contrasts the "solid self" (the differentiated self which holds fast yet remains connected to the larger system) with what he calls the "pseudo-self"–the self which is highly influenced by systemic relational forces and is prone to reactivity and cutoff.[54] He conceded, however, that even the most differentiated people probably ranked no higher than a 75 on his scale.

Both Friedman and Steinke have expanded Bowen's initial concept of self-differentiation when applying it to congregational leadership by adding the concept of "basing decisions on principles." Friedman's Chapter 9: *Leadership and Self in A Congregational Family* in <u>Generation to Generation</u> and his book <u>Failure of Nerve:</u>

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[52] <u>Family Therapy in Clinical Practice</u>, 306.
[53] Ibid

[54] Ibid

Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix, both underscore the necessity of church leaders being well "differentiated."

"Differentiation" is a concept Bowen borrowed from cellular biology and it describes the process of how cells mature.[55] Stem class are cells that have not become a specific kind of cell (e.g., a liver cell). In nature, cells differentiate by developing membranes that allow them to remain connected yet separate and distinguishable from other cells. Differentiation of self is a key Bowenian concept, and today it has been expanded by such writers as Friedman and Steinke to include the following four components.[56] I offer this four-pronged definition here because after five years of teaching my methodology course, not one pastor yet has been able to define "differentiation" correctly. A differentiated pastoral leader must possess the following four capacities.

First, self-differentiation means possessing the capacity to articulate a clear statement of self: "This is me--this is not me." "I like this and I don't like that." "This is where I end and you begin." It means taking courageous stands not based on the whims of public opinion. Differentiation is always about maintaining appropriate boundaries with others–and not meddling in other persons' business or territory. Understood biblically, it means "taking the log out of our own eye before noticing the speck in the other's," or what Friedman called taking "maximum responsibility for one's own destiny and emotional being."[57] Differentiation requires individuals first to

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[55] Ibid., 362.
[56] Peter Steinke, Congregational Leadership, 19.
[57] Friedman, Generation to Generation, 27.

understand how they are functioning in the system–its focus begins by assessing oneself and not diagnosing others. Friedman writes: "The possibilities of change are maximized . . . when we concentrate on modifying our own way of functioning, our own input into the family 'black box.'"[58]

Second, differentiation means possessing the capacity to maintain a mature commitment to remain appropriately connected to the larger system or what Friedman called "staying in touch."[59] In systems theory, a clear articulation of self is always married to remaining connected to the larger system. There can be no "Lone Ranger mentality" in self-differentiated persons or systems. One always weighs how one's behavior will affect and effect the larger system. Incidentally, compromise and meekness, and self-differentiation are not mutually exclusive. Steinke notes that differentiation means "choosing different distances with different persons at different times."[60] The emphasis is on the fact that a differentiated person does the "choosing."

Third, differentiated persons and systems possess the capacity to remain non-reactive even in anxious situations. Differentiated persons and systems always "look before they leap." They possess the emotionally mature capacity to self-monitor and self-regulate so as to remain non-reactive even when anxious is essential.

Fourth, differentiated persons and systems possess the capacity to base and make decisions on time-tested principles rather than capricious whims, rumors, unsubstantiated threats, or fear. Well-differentiated persons and systems take time to

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[58] Ibid., 18.
[59] Ibid., 117.

[60] Peter Steinke, class notes

pause and ponder a situation and base decisions–not on highly charged emotion or inadequate data–but on thoughtful processes of information gathering that patiently questions and probes. Differentiated persons base decisions on time-tested spiritual principles not emotional capriciousness. One of Friedman's greatest assertions was to help get people into their "thinking brain." Friedman writes: "The analogue to family systems thinking is that what counts is not thinking about our systems but thinking about our thinking."[61]

I'm told by those who studied with him that one of his favorite ways to "coach" a pastor through a sticky congregational problem was to have pastors ask their boards: "What is our best thinking on this matter?" He wasn't discounting feelings–but rather wanted to avoid falling prey to emotional reactivity by asking persons to engage the higher resources of their intellects. I think if Friedman were asked to speak at ADME, he would exhort us to develop programs that develop and equip our students to become exceptional pastoral leaders by learning to embody the four essential components of differentiation.

Let us now move to the final section of the paper–Evaluating Doctor of Ministry Projects Through Systems Lenses.

Part III–Evaluating Doctor of Ministry Projects Through Systems Lenses:

Part III has four sub-sections: A) The value of narrative reflection in evaluation; B) The value of family systems constructs in evaluation; C) The Systemic Value of a Lay Advisory team; D) the Value of Steinke's Healthy Congregational Functioning Chart.

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[61] Friedman, <u>Generation to Generation,</u> 129.

Evaluating Doctor of Ministry projects is one of the more difficult aspects of D.Min. research for both faculty and students. Most pastors have not had much training, if any, in designing empirical methods of evaluation that measure ministerial effectiveness. The problem of evaluation is further confounded by the fact that most seminary faculty are not trained in empirical research and feel uncomfortable or ill-equipped when guiding students both to craft methods to design and/or assess the effectiveness of ministry projects.[62] In summarizing his research on D.Min. programs and directors, Tim Lincoln writes: "The data presented here suggest that D.Min. faculties are not expert at teaching appropriate research methods."[63] Systems theory, however, offers methods of evaluation that both students and faculty can both learn and employ with relative ease.

A) **The Value of Narrative Theological Reflection in Evaluation**:

Family systems theory is very helpful at the conclusion of a project because systemic changes can be assessed to see, to what degree, if any, students' doctoral work affected the ecclesial system. Using family systems theory to evaluate the effects of doctoral projects constitutes a kind of "narrative reflection" of the larger system because both students and faculty can ask of the completed project narrative reflection-type questions.

In 2007, Carl Savage from Drew University Theological School presented a paper

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[62] Timothy Lincoln, *The Quality of Doctor of Ministry Education in 2003: What Program Directors Think*, <u>Theological Education</u>, Volume 39, Number 2 (2003) 137-148.

[63] Ibid, 146.

at the ADME convention in Philadelphia entitled: *Learning From the Faith Story of the Community: The Role of Theological Reflection in D.Min. Projects*, which draws on narrative theology and systems theory and subsequently offers several helpful narrative questions when assessing or "discerning"[64] the effect of D.Min. projects.

I have taken the liberty of paraphrasing some of Savage's key terms by "re-framing" them into questions that mesh with systems thinking. The following questions can easily be translated into some oral or written form when evaluating a final project. The questions are: 1) To what extent did this project add to or help rewrite the system's story by offering an "emerging" or "alternative story?"[65] To what degree did this project offer or introduce to the system a newly intended or "preferred future?"[66] Did the project offer the ministry setting "a preferred way of being"[67] or an "unrealized potential?"[68] Did the project help the community see and grapple with "what was, what is, and what can or might be?"[69] Did the project help the community to grasp a "more functional, faithful, or hopeful story?"[70] To what degree does the project equip and facilitate the community to reflect on God's story intersecting with its

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[64] Carl Savage, *Learning From the Faith Story of the Community: The Role of Theological Reflection in D.Min. Projects*, 6. Savage makes a good case for employing the language of "discerning" instead of "measuring" in D.Min. project evaluations noting that his narrative method concedes that all research is subjective and all communities have "competing stories." The D.Min. student's task, therefore, is to be a "story broker," who observes and names the congregation's most "elegant stories."
[65] Ibid., 12.
[66] Ibid., 5.
[67] Ibid., 6.
[68] Ibid., 12.
[69] Ibid, 13
[70] Ibid

corporate and individual stories?[71]

B) The Value of Family Systems Constructs in Evaluation:

As described in previous sections, other systemic elements which can be assessed or "discerned" in a final project's evaluation section are addressed in these set of questions: What systemic structural changes did this project attempt to introduce? How effectively did the student help implement these changes? What has changed systemically as a result of this student's project? Is the system more "open" or "closed"[72] than before? Is there more or less triangulation? Has there been any correction to systemic over-functioning/under-functioning? Are congregational leaders more differentiated? Is communication within the system more direct? Has anxiety increased or decreased as a result of this project? Can the student cite any evidence of improvement in overall systemic health? What degree and forms of systemic resistance or sabotage surfaced during the course of the project? How well did the student handle systemic resistance? To what degree did the student model a "non-anxious presence" while leading this project? To what extent was the student critically self-aware of his/her family of origin issues that might be at work while conducting this research?

C. The Systemic Value Of A Lay Advisory Team:

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[71] Ibid., 10.

[72] Systems therapists assess the parts of a system that are "open" or "closed."   Systems may be "open" on some subjects yet simultaneously "closed" on others. Generally an "open" system is one where power is shared or at least communicated openly and directly. In an "open" system all persons may speak freely and "have a voice." Leaders in an "open system" are well differentiated and stay regularly connected to their subordinates and constituents. An "open" system doesn't tolerate or foster "secrets."

The Drew University Theological School Doctor of Ministry program effectively employs another component that is very helpful in the designing, implementing, and evaluating of final projects. Drew requires its students to develop a "lay advisory team" in all ministry projects. This idea is very helpful because it requires key members from students' ecclesial systems to be involved substantively in the design, "story brokering," implementation, and evaluation of the ministry project. Having a lay advisory team helps structure the project more systemically and diminishes the notion that students are "the research experts" and discourages them from viewing and using their congregations as their personal "laboratories." Rather, pastors and lay persons join in doing ministry projects together. Having a lay advisory team rightly emphasizes a Hiltnerian "perspectival"[73] approach, i.e., the important role that lay persons play in "brokering" the system's most salient stories as told from multiple "perspectives." When pastors are the sole ministry project researchers–the narratives they gather are sure to be skewed since parishioners so want to "help" pastors do well in their projects they often do not tell the system's "whole story" with the pastor present.

One final evaluation tool is a grid developed by Peter Steinke (see below) that assesses "healthy congregational functioning." Several of our students have used this chart to evaluate their projects' effectiveness in improving congregational health from a systems perspective. The chart shows how family systems constructs can be used to discern, assess, and evaluate the effectiveness of a Doctor of Ministry project.

One of our students is currently crafting a project that assesses the relationship between the degree to which a church is "missional" and the degree to which the

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[73] Seward Hiltner, Preface to Pastoral Theology, (New York: Abingdon, 1958).

church is functioning in a healthy systemic way using Steinke's grid. Initially the student raised a great question: "Does a church first need to be systemically healthy in order to engage in authentic mission–or can engaging in substantive mission help a church to become more systemically healthy? The student is pursuing the latter in his project–attempting to assess the level of healthy functioning (as defined by Steinke) prior to introducing his project which centers on engaging his church in substantive mission, and then evaluating the functioning of the church after the project is finished to see what, if anything, has changed. This section concludes with Steinke's Healthy Congregational Functioning grid.

D. The Value of A Systemic Congregational Functioning Chart: The following chart, or congregational assessment tool developed by Peter Steinke employs key systems constructs in order to assess and evaluate the systemic health of any congregation. It is intended to be distributed to lay leaders and congregants and not to be used by pastors to "diagnose" their churches individually without congregational input. It is best employed when the congregation uses it thoughtfully and candidly to assess and evaluate its communal health.

HEALTHY CONGREGATIONAL FUNCTIONING (by Dr. Peter Steinke)

Taken with permission from: Healthy Congregations Handbook—Workshop 2

	Chronically Anxious	Inconsistent	Functional	Advanced	Genuine Community
Mission (Identity, who we are)	Barely effective, accomplish little, if any, of its mission	Sporadic achievement of mission goals, not lasting, can't sustain	Accomplish basic mission goals most of the time	Mission goals are achieved, may slip occasionally, yet more effective than functional groups	Mission is accomplished effectively
Focus (Vision, where we are going)	Always on edge, chaotic, adrift, wander aimlessly, crisis-oriented all the time	Never really focused for long	Can sustain focus generally	Stay focused for substantial periods of time	Clear vision guides them, stay on course
Spirit (Mood, tone, what is the quality of life)	Testy, "on egg shells", dispirited, demoralized, difficult to feel positive about anything	Occasional glimpses of spirit, but not sustainable	As much good spirit as bad spirit	Good spirit evidenced much of the time	High spirit, lively, generous, playful
Leadership (Immunity, creativity, who is giving definition and direction)	Ineffective, either *tyranny or wimpy * *The tyrannical leader takes stands, but not on basis of personal beliefs, but rather over against others*	At times functional but with no consistency	Provide some immunity and creativity	Effective leaders, only occasionally ineffective	Well-defined leaders who stay connected to others
INTERACTION (How do we relate, what kind of system)					
■ **Boundaries**	Either emotionally stuck together and invasive of each other or lots of cut-offs and minimal contact	Observed once in a while but no uniformity	Respect for boundaries is generally upheld	Above average with some minor or occasional violations of boundaries	Closeness with distinct boundaries; people know where they begin and end, and where others begin and end. If violation, it is dealt with swiftly.
■ **Responsibility**	Blame is unending, dependent (want to be taken care of)	Blame may stop but if comes back again	Fair amount of responsibility	Responsibility is quite high with some dependencies	Very responsible
■ **Resiliency**	Rigid, still, contrariness, one way only	Sometimes more open but readily regress to rigid responses	Can usually be flexible, innovative	High end of continuum with some spots of controlling or rigid behavior	Can meet challenge of changing conditions or situations
■ **Clarity** beliefs	Everything is generalized	Can be specific but never predictable	Most are clear	Normally definite about beliefs	Strong, clear convictions
self-expression	Vague, nebulous, indefinite	Clichés, sound bites	As often direct as indirect	Lots of speaking what is on people's mind	Open, direct expression
■ **Conflict** Negotiation Appraise	"This is war. Every person for him or herself."	"I see glimpses of kindness but usually feel bet up"	"I do my part, they do their part"	"People cooperate. We have ups and downs but mostly ups"	"I can take stands, others can take stands. Differences spur growth not dissension."
Handle	Denial, avoidance	Some response but mostly reactive behaviors	Can be as responsive as reactive	More up front, direct response than usual	"Speak the truth in love", seeks justice as well as love
Confidence in resources	Don't really believe anything good will happen or can be made to happen	One or two evidences of confidence but recedes quickly	Some confidence of working through things	Take action to work on conflict with sureness about ability to handle it, with occasional default	Plenty of resources with much confidence to manage conflict

HEALTHY CONGREGATIONAL FUNCTIONING CONTINUUM

	Chronically Anxious	Inconsistent	Functional	Advanced	Genuine Community
Mission	1	2	3	4	5
Focus	1	2	3	4	5
Spirit	1	2	3	4	5
Leadership	1	2	3	4	5
Interaction Boundaries	1	2	3	4	5
Responsibility	1	2	3	4	5
Resiliency	1	2	3	4	5
Clarity Beliefs	1	2	3	4	5
Self-expression	1	2	3	4	5
Conflict Negotiation Appraise	1	2	3	4	5
Handle	1	2	3	4	5
Confidence in resources	1	2	3	4	5

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that employing the major constructs of family systems theory (as illustrated in the writings of Bowen, Friedman, Kerr, Richardson and Steinke) is critically important to designing, implementing, and evaluating Doctor of Ministry final projects because not to do so assumes that both students and faculty will miss important systemic elements which are embedded in the ecclesial contexts being

studied.

Since most Doctor of Ministry projects attempt to change or correct an ecclesial system, and since most systems resist change, being trained in family systems constructs and congregational studies assessment tools prior to conducting Doctor of Ministry research is important if not essential because it provides helpful ways to anticipate and address homeostasis. It is critical for Doctor of Ministry students to anticipate what types and degrees of anxiety might surface in response to their projects.

In addition to anxiety, it is critical to understand and assess such other systems constructs as: under-functioning/over-functioning; secrets, sabotage, mutual influence of behaviors, triangles, triangulation, change, resistance, balance, position/personality, equilibrium, backwashing, leadership through differentiation, critical self-assessment, and systemic observation and history taking.

Students must assess, evaluate, and "discern" not just the ecclesial contexts they are studying but also know how to evaluate and assess themselves by discerning what personal, relational, or familial issues they are potentially working out in their respective projects by doing their own "family of origin work" and critical self-reflection.

Finally, specific examples of how to use narrative theological reflection in concert with family systems assessment tools and Steinke's grid were offered as helpful and concrete ways for both students and faculty to evaluate students' final project's effectiveness in promoting richer and deeper pastoral ministry in their respective faith communities.

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